

Lesson: Introduction

Johtje Vos, Rescuer Choices of Courage

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:

- [Rescue](#) article
- [Map of Amsterdam Environs, 1942](#)
- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. quotation
- Johtje Vos' 30-minute visual history testimony
- Johtje Vos' biography
- "Choices of Courage" student-activity handout
- Discussion questions
- Testimony glossary

Time Requirement:

1-3 class periods

Student Objectives

- To use viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret Johtje Vos' visual history testimony.
- To develop a basic understanding of aspects of rescue during the Nazi occupation of a country.
- To consider and assess the dangers and difficult choices Johtje's family faced in hiding Jewish refugees during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands.
- To discuss how we can make a difference through the choices we make in our everyday lives in dealing with others.

Lesson Overview

Teachers will introduce the lesson by discussing with students that there were those who helped Jews during the Holocaust but that the decision to do so was not a simple one. Difficult situations and choices regularly presented themselves to rescuers. After teachers use the Historical Introduction section to provide a brief context of **Rescue** during the Holocaust, students, with teacher guidance, will consider that circumstances, as well as choices, were crucial elements, both in becoming rescuers and maintaining the role. Then, through use of Johtje's testimony and the accompanying student activity, students will assess the choices and complex situations with which rescuers were faced on a daily basis. Teachers are also encouraged to use the post-viewing discussion questions to examine Johtje'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 article **Rescue** from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Holocaust Encyclopedia to provide students brief background information on the rescue of Jews during the Holocaust. Students may also find it helpful to examine the **Map of Amsterdam Environs, 1942** to locate Amersfoort, Johtje's birthplace, and Leiden, her hometown.

Previewing Focus

Write on the board the following quote by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.:

"The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."

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

POSSIBLE PROMPTS: What does this quote mean to you? How does the quote reflect the choices people may make during difficult times? Afterward, allow students to share but only by quoting their own pieces of writing.

Transition

Students should start to see how people can make a difference in difficult times by the convergence of circumstance and choice, or more commonly, by being in the right place at the right time with the right frame of mind, an attitude that Johtje Vos' testimony reflects.

Viewing Activity

Before students view Johtje's testimony, teachers may want to briefly introduce her by quoting from the introductory text card in her testimony:

"Johtje (Johanna) Vos was born December 29, 1909, in Amersfoort, the Netherlands. In this testimony, Johtje describes her life in the Netherlands and her participation in Dutch resistance and rescue."

Hand out "Choices of Courage" activity for students to complete while they view Johtje Vos' abridged 30-minute visual history testimony. In combination or as a separate activity, teachers can also prepare students to examine Johtje's testimony by use of the discussion questions.

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It is also beneficial to have students examine Johtje's narrative style itself to discuss ways in which her style contributes to the overall poignancy of her testimony.

POSSIBLE PROMPT: How do Johtje's verbal and nonverbal communication techniques effectively contribute to her meaning? *(Sample answer: Many aspects contribute to Johtje'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 physical gestures, such as her eye contact, posture, and facial expressions.)*

Postviewing Focus

Have students gather in small groups to share their rankings of some of the choices Johtje recounts in her testimony. Each group should be prepared to explore why they regard certain choices as being more or less difficult than others.

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Discussion Questions

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

1. What was the effect of the German invasion of the Netherlands on the lives of Johtje and her family? *(Sample answer: Johtje says that for the first time she had fear. She and her husband, Aart, started immediately to help Jewish people, which added even more fear and danger, so their lives changed very much.)*
2. For Jews in the Netherlands, what was the effect of the German invasion? *(Sample answer: Johtje says that prior to the German invasion of the Netherlands, many Jews from Germany had fled to the Netherlands for safety. After the invasion of the Netherlands, many Jews tried to flee to England. Those who stayed went into hiding.)*
3. Johtje states that she and Aart were part of an “underground organization.” What does the term underground mean? *(Sample answer: According to the glossary on the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Website, underground means an “organized group acting in secrecy to oppose the government or, during war, to resist occupying enemy forces.”)*
4. What is “the Group” to which Johtje belonged, and what made it part of an underground organization? *(Sample answer: “The Group” was made up of some citizens from Johtje's village of Laren and from the surrounding area. Although members sometimes met in person, they tried to accomplish most of their communication through couriers. “The Group” fits the definition of an underground organization because those who belonged were “acting in secrecy” and chose to “resist occupying enemy forces.”)*
5. How did “the Group” use simple objects like scraps of paper and geraniums to communicate? *(Sample answer: Torn scraps of paper were used for the couriers when they had to deal with people whom they didn't know. As long as the torn scraps matched, everything was okay. The geranium was used as a sign for danger. It stayed in one window, so if it was moved to a different one, the members of the organization knew not to come to the house.)*
6. One of Johtje and Aart's first rescue efforts came when they took into their home the small son of a couple who had been ordered into a ghetto. Although Johtje states in her testimony that helping was what “decent people” would do, what other factors likely played a part in their choice to

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act? *(Sample answer: Since there was a friendship already in place, Johtje and Aart probably knew of the family's plight sooner than if they had been strangers. Also the friendship between the families may have intensified Johtje and Aart's sense of obligation and urgency to rescue the boy. In addition, they must have been confident that they had the means to care for the boy. Teachers may have students contemplate additional factors: Johtje's upbringing, her religious beliefs, her willingness to take risks, her large circle of acquaintances and friends, an inner circle whom she trusted, including a loving husband, who shared her beliefs, etc.)*

7. Imagine being in a position like Johtje and Aart's: In addition to your own children, you have just assumed the added responsibility and risk of protecting and caring for someone else's child. Now "the Group" has asked you to take another person into your home. What are some examples of the pros and cons that might influence your decision? *(Answers will vary. Teachers should guide students to see that it was never an easy decision and undoubtedly became more complex with every additional person whom they hid. Also, it is important for students to recognize that every choice, once made, had daily implications for both rescuers and those they hid. In essence, it wasn't a choice that could be easily "unmade" yet Johtje and Aart felt it was their human duty to help those in need and did so despite the considerable risks they faced.)*
8. How does Johtje characterize the daily life of having people hidden in her home? *(Sample answer: Johtje and Aart hid thirty-two Jews during the war but not all at the same time. The most they had at the same time was fourteen—albeit for a short time. The unrelenting tension they experienced from four years of living in constant fear of exposure wore on them tremendously. Also, food was scarce even though as German citizens, Johtje and her two daughters received double food coupons. It was also difficult and exhausting to be around and responsible for so many people all of the time. There was no privacy, and being in such close quarters often caused people to fight with each other. However, she says, they all pitched in and shared everything, including the housework, etc. The specific circumstances of daily life undoubtedly varied based on how many people were in the house at any given time, as well as the stage/state of the war.)*
9. A Jewish man came to Johtje's house without papers and begged her to hide him. What does Johtje choose to do? Why? How does she feel about her choice? What does the story demonstrate about the constant difficulties and dangers of being a rescuer? *(Sample answer: Even though she felt herself wavering, Johtje denies the man's request. Because he had not come to*

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her through the proper channels, she could not endanger the entire organization and all of the people, both rescuers and those they hid. Johtje suffered for days, wondering what had become of the man and second-guessing her decision. Johtje later learns that the man had been working with the Germans and cries with the relief of knowing she had made the right decision. Johtje's story demonstrates the almost unbearable emotional stress that came with many of the difficult decisions rescuers often had to make.)

10. What does Johtje's story about "the package" demonstrate? *(Sample answer: "The package" was where all the secret papers were, such as the passports of Jews and the names of the citizens who were hiding them, so it was "deadly dangerous," in Johtje's words. For that reason, "the package" was moved from house to house, and its hiding place was rarely divulged to anyone, even to others in "the Group." Johtje indicates that they'd have been shot if they would have been caught with "the package.")*
11. What do you think of Johtje's comment that she and her husband "didn't tell things to each other" about what they did during the German occupation of the Netherlands? *(Students' answers will vary. Teachers should ensure students understand that the difficult and dangerous circumstances of their lives at this time forced them to extreme measures, such as keeping secrets from each other. It should be made clear that Johtje and Aart kept things from each other in order to best maintain everyone's safety. Students might want to discuss how difficult it must have been for the couple to keep these secrets because they loved and relied on each other so much.)*
12. What were the pros and cons of making decisions as part of "the Group," which constituted a kind of rescue community? *(Sample answer: The positives include a sense of mutual support, pooling of resources, and reinforcement of one's decisions; the negatives included the increased danger to all if one member was captured and/or tortured, etc.)*
13. Helen Fein, a sociologist, coined the phrase "**universe of obligation**," which she has defined as "the limits of the common conscience; those whom we are obligated to protect, to take into account, and to whom we must account." Think about your own "universe of obligation" and give examples of those to whom you feel obligated to protect. What kind of commonalities emerge as you share your answers? To whom do we appear to feel most obligated to protect? Why? How might understanding the concept of universe of obligation help us to better understand the actions of

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many rescuers? How might it help us better understand ourselves? (*Sample answer: Answers will vary; most students will first list their families and friends, maybe even pets. Teachers should lead the discussion so as to encourage students to expand their thinking to include those in need nationally and internationally as part of their “universe of obligation.” Elicit from students examples of ways they can protect those in their “universe of obligation,” and include what the benefits and risks might be for them to do so.*)

14. In **Dr. King’s acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize**, he said: “I refuse to accept despair as the final response to the ambiguities of history. I refuse to accept the idea that the ‘isness’ of man’s present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal ‘oughtness’ that forever confronts him. I refuse to accept the idea that man is mere flotsom and jetsom in the river of life, unable to influence the unfolding events which surround him.” In response to this quote, consider Dr. King’s phrase, “events that surround” a person. Do events have to be local for us to be surrounded by them? Why or why not? What types of events can we influence? How? (*Students should be encouraged to consider even small choice-making events they encounter on a daily basis, from whether to walk past or intervene as someone is bullied in the cafeteria, to how to react to a friend receiving abusive text messages from his or her girlfriend/boyfriend. Additionally, they should be willing to think about global events as events that surround them because of the immediacy and availability of global news. With the world being so interconnected, it seems reasonable that we should include global suffering as part of our awareness and social action.*)

Biographical Connection

Once students have watched Johtje Vos’ testimony and completed the activity and/or discussion questions, teachers may wish to print and hand out Johtje’s biographical profile for students to read as a closing activity.

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

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Glossary

The following glossary has been created to assist students and teachers with potentially unfamiliar words, phrases, or concepts in Johtje's testimony.

Courier³ An espionage agent transferring secret information or a runner of contraband.

Reformed Churches in The Netherlands¹ was established in 1892 when a number of Reformed churches under the guidance of Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper and the Christian Reformed Church united, thus separating from the Netherlands Reformed Church. It became the second largest Protestant Church in Holland.

Seyss-Inquart, Arthur² Arthur Seyss-Inquart (1892-1946) was Reich governor of Austria, deputy governor to Hans Frank in the General Government of Occupied Poland, and Reich commissioner for the German-occupied Netherlands. In the latter capacity, Seyss-Inquart shared responsibility for the deportation of Dutch Jews and the shooting of hostages. He was found guilty on counts two, three, and four (crimes against peace, war crimes, and crimes against humanity) and sentenced to death. Seyss-Inquart was hanged on October 16, 1946.

Shoah⁴ A Hebrew word meaning “catastrophe,” referring to the Holocaust.

Underground¹ Organized group acting in secrecy to oppose the government or, during war, to resist occupying enemy forces

Source of Definitions

¹ USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archives Search Terms and Definitions

² The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum online glossary and/or *Holocaust Encyclopedia*.

³ Merriam Webster Online Dictionary 2009

⁴ *Echoes and Reflections: a Multimedia Curriculum on the Holocaust*

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Extension Activities

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

1. When we become inspired by the stories of rescuers such as Johtje and Aart Vos and Miep Gies, who helped to hide Anne Frank and her family, we might be tempted to generalize that most Jews in the Netherlands survived the Holocaust. In order to put the history into proper perspective, conduct some research about the fate of Jews in the Netherlands, and as a class discuss your findings.
2. What factors were critical for both rescuers and those they were hiding to avoid detection and discovery? Compare the lists. In addition to luck, do you see any factors as crucial to both?
3. Research another story of average Dutch citizens who helped Jews, and compare their experiences with that of Johtje's. Can we draw any conclusions about hiding or helping others? To extend this activity, research a story about average Polish citizens who helped Jews. Which factors are similar? Just as importantly, which factors are different?

References

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

1. **Rescue:** <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005185>
2. **Map of Amsterdam Environs, 1942:** http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/media_nm.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005436&MediaId=1768
3. **McRel:** <http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>
4. **“Universe of Obligation” Concept:** <http://www.ushmm.org/conscience/analysis/details/1995-10-24-02/fein.pdf>
5. **Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Acceptance Speech for the Nobel Prize:** http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-acceptance.html

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Additional Resources

To learn more about rescue during the Holocaust, teachers/students may consult the following online sources:

1. **Jewish Foundation for the Righteous, Stories of Moral Courage: click on the Netherlands, and then click on Aart and Johtje Vos for additional information:** http://jfr.convio.net/site/PageServer?pagename=sup_map
2. **Yad Vashem, The Righteous Among the Nations, basic information and menu of related topics:**
http://www1.yadvashem.org/righteous_new/index.html
3. **Yad Vashem, The Righteous Among the Nations, statistics and information by country:**
http://www1.yadvashem.org/righteous_new/statistics_overview.html