

Franz Wohlfahrt, Jehovah's Witness Standing Firm in Faith

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, Religion, and Language Arts

Materials for Lesson:

- "[Jehovah's Witnesses: Victims of the Nazi Era](#)" article
- Patrick Overton quotation (Option 1)
- [Statement of Principles](#) (Option 2)
- [Declaration Renouncing Beliefs](#) (Option 2)
- Franz Wohlfahrt's 30-minute visual history testimony
- Franz Wohlfahrt's biography
- "Standing Firm in Faith" 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 Franz Wohlfahrt's visual history testimony.
- To develop a basic understanding of the Nazi persecution of Jehovah Witnesses.
- To consider how Franz stood firm in his faith, despite the hardships and persecution he endured.
- To understand that nonviolent, spiritual resistance has been practiced at various times in modern history.

Lesson Overview

Teachers will introduce the lesson by discussing with students that the Nazis targeted different groups of people during the Holocaust. One such group was the Jehovah's Witnesses. Students will become familiar with the persecution of the Jehovah's Witnesses by reading the "**Jehovah's Witnesses: Victims of the Nazi Era**" article and doing a brief previewing focus activity. Students will then watch the 30-minute testimony of Franz Wohlfahrt, following which students will read an original poem by Franz and rank events in his testimony to determine which events most challenged his faith. Teachers are also encouraged to use the postviewing discussion questions to examine Franz'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](#).

Historical Introduction

Assign and/or discuss "**Jehovah's Witnesses: Victims of the Nazi Era**" from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, which will provide students brief background information on the Nazi persecution of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Franz Wohlfahrt, Jehovah's Witness Standing Firm in Faith

Previewing Focus

Note: Teachers have the option of choosing between two Previewing Focus quotations: 1) faith-based or 2) document-based

OPTION 1: Write on the board the following quote from educator, Patrick Overton:

“When you walk to the edge of all the light you have and take that first step into the darkness of the unknown, you must believe that one of two things will happen: There will be something solid for you to stand upon, or you will be taught how to fly.”

Have students respond to the quote above by either free-writing or discussing in small groups.

POSSIBLE PROMPTS: What is the author saying about the power of faith? Think of a time in your life when this quote might have given you strength. Discuss a time in your life or that of someone you know when this quote has proven to be true.

OPTION 2: Write on the board the following excerpt from the Jehovah's Witnesses' Statement of Principles, which was sent to the German (Nazi) government in 1934 by every congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany:

“We have no interest in political affairs, but are wholly devoted to God's Kingdom under Christ His King.”

Encourage students to consider carefully the construction and meaning of this single sentence.

POSSIBLE PROMPTS: The single statement joined with ‘but’ conveys two distinct messages. What are they? Do you think such a statement would make the leaders of the German government think of the Jehovah's Witnesses as a greater or lesser threat? Why?

Then add the following quote to the board:

“I will in the future esteem the laws of the State, especially in the event of war will I, with weapon in hand, defend the fatherland, and join in every way the community of the people.”

Franz Wohlfahrt, Jehovah's Witness Standing Firm in Faith

Encourage students to carefully consider the second sentence.

POSSIBLE PROMPTS: How does the second statement differ from the first in intent and meaning? Since the first was written by the Jehovah's Witnesses, who might have written the second? What makes you think so?

After students have had a chance to discuss the meaning of the second sentence, explain that generally Jehovah's Witnesses were offered the chance to be free from persecution if they would sign the **Declaration Renouncing Beliefs**, from which the second sentence is taken. Although the Jehovah's Witnesses could have been released by renouncing their beliefs, there are few documented cases in which a Jehovah's Witness actually signed the declaration.

Transition

After discussion of either Option 1 or Option 2, students should consider how deeply held one's religious convictions must be in order to stand firm in faith during the most trying of times as will be demonstrated through the testimony of Franz Wohlfahrt.

Viewing Activity

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

“Franz Wohlfahrt was born January 18, 1920, in Velden, Austria. In this testimony, Franz, a Jehovah's Witness, describes the persecution of his family and his own arrest and confinement in German prisons and concentration camps.”

View Franz Wohlfahrt's abridged 30-minute visual history testimony. Teachers should instruct students to pay particular attention to the hardships he and his family endured because of their faith. In combination or as a separate activity, teachers can also prepare students to examine Franz's testimony by use of the discussion questions.

It is also useful to have students examine Franz's narrative style itself to discuss ways in which it contributes to the overall poignancy of his testimony.

POSSIBLE PROMPT: How do Franz's verbal and nonverbal communication

Franz Wohlfahrt, Jehovah's Witness Standing Firm in Faith

techniques effectively contribute to meaning? *(Sample answer: Many aspects contribute to the poignancy of his testimony, such as the inflection/modulation/tone/volume of his voice, the tempo/pacing of his narrative, and his descriptive word choice, as well as physical gestures, such as Franz's eye contact, posture, and facial expressions.)*

Postviewing Focus

After students have watched the testimony, teachers should hand out the Standing Firm in Faith student activity, explaining that the poem "In My Faith I Will Always Stand Firm" was written by Franz in 1944, when he was certain he was about to die for his faith. In small groups, have students read Franz's poem for meaning and discuss various events from his testimony that demonstrate the difficulties of standing firm. Some examples have been provided on the handout, but students may have additional examples to share. Groups should be prepared to share with the class their choices of events from Franz's testimony, which they feel would have been the most difficult to make and still maintain his faith.

Lesson: Discussion Questions

Franz Wohlfahrt, Jehovah's Witness Standing Firm in Faith

Discussion Questions

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

1. Shortly after the *Anschluss* in 1938, Franz found himself in opposition to the Nazi regime. How so? *(Sample answer: They noticed he wasn't saluting Hitler, and he answered "Good day" or "Hello" instead of "Heil, Hitler," so he was reported repeatedly to the Gestapo.)*
2. What ultimatum did the SS and SA offer Franz when they came to talk to him? What was his response? *(Sample answer: They said he must join the Hitler Youth and must salute or he'd be taken to Dachau, a concentration camp. He responded by telling them he couldn't do the 'Heil, Hitler' greeting because it means salvation comes from Hitler, and it would be hypocritical because he believed that salvation would come only through Jehovah God. He also told them he was willing to work, willing to pay the taxes, and respect Hitler as the head of the state but would not worship him.)*
3. Not only did Franz defy the order to comply, but what did he do next? *(Sample answer: He was officially baptized as a Jehovah's Witness on August 30, 1939, when he was 19.)*
4. What happened to his father? *(Sample answer: Gregor was eventually sent to Berlin, where he was sentenced to death but given a month to renounce his faith. He did not. He was beheaded as a result.)*
5. How did the German authorities try to trick Franz into renouncing his faith? What happened when he refused? *(Sample answer: They sent him to a "work camp" that was really more of a military training camp and tried to get him to wear a military uniform and participate in military drills and maneuvers under the guise of "work." When he refused, Franz was thrown into a prison cell at the work camp, interrogated, convicted, and sentenced to five years of hard labor.)*
6. How long was he imprisoned near Rodgau-Dieburg in Germany, and how was he treated? *(Sample answer: Franz was there from 1941 until his liberation in 1945. He was isolated from other Jehovah's Witnesses. Like other prisoners, he was forced to perform labor in harsh conditions with little food*

Lesson: Discussion Questions

Franz Wohlfahrt, Jehovah's Witness Standing Firm in Faith

or protection from the cold. Although persecuted by many guards, Franz was treated kindly by a few who were impressed by his religious convictions despite the hardships he suffered.)

7. While at Rodgau-Dieburg, he almost lost his legs to gangrene; in fact, at the time of his interview Franz still suffered from the ill effects. Discuss the difficulties of remaining true to one's beliefs even when it means intense suffering and possible death. *(Sample answer: It is important to stress to students that none of us know how we would respond in such a situation. Moreover, it is likely that no two people would respond exactly the same. What we do know is that the pain caused by the gangrene must have been excruciating and almost unbearable. If we add in other factors, such as being separated from his family, grieving for his father, enduring brutal cold, hard labor, and a starvation diet, it only becomes more remarkable that Franz could maintain his faith and convictions, particularly when, on several occasions, he was given the opportunity to renounce his faith.)*
8. Franz practiced spiritual resistance in the camps by continuing to practice his religious beliefs openly. Do you think this type of resistance is just as important or effective as armed resistance? *(Sample answer: Although answers will vary based on students' own beliefs and attitudes, the attempt to maintain one's moral and spiritual self—one's very humanity—in the face of all efforts to the contrary is often cited as having been important to one's dignity and integrity, quite possibly even for survival. Teachers could instruct students to contemplate what the word effective would ultimately mean in the context of nonviolent resistance in contrast with armed resistance.)*
9. How do you think Franz's life would have been different if he had renounced his faith? *(Sample answer: Since few Jehovah's Witnesses ever renounced their faith despite coercion and persecution, it's hard to find a precedent for how Franz's life might have been different. Had he renounced his faith, he probably would not have suffered such prolonged physical trauma. However, the spiritual trauma caused by recanting may have been just as traumatic for him, since his faith and that of his family's was so strong.)*
10. Spiritual resistance is a form of nonviolent protest or resistance. Many instances of nonviolent resistance have existed in the post-Holocaust world. What are examples? *(Sample answer: Martin Luther King Jr., and the civil rights movement; Nelson Mandela and struggle to end the apartheid in South Africa; Cesar Chavez and the Chicano civil rights movement.)*

Lesson: Discussion Questions

Franz Wohlfahrt, Jehovah's Witness Standing Firm in Faith

11. How have the Internet and other new forms of communication made news of humanitarian injustices more accessible to the public? *(Sample answer: With the advent of the Internet and various technological advances in its wake, we now have the capability to have instant and often unfiltered access to global events and humanitarian crises. For example, we can go to Google Earth in order to bear witness to current threats of genocide across the globe. Teachers could also have students go to the [Genocide Intervention Network Website](#) to see exactly how the Internet is being used to combat genocide.)*
12. Does this added accessibility to information automatically lead to a humanitarian response? Why or why not? *(Sample answer: No, there are thousands of hate sites, which promote violence, intolerance and the denial of the Holocaust. Teachers can use this time to discuss responsible Internet use and documentation or help students to decipher legitimate Websites from hate sites. In addition, even people who want to help can be overwhelmed by all the information available, and without leadership, find it difficult to focus and act.)*
13. In the United States there are rallies and other peaceful events designed to draw attention to the genocide in Darfur and the plight of the people in Myanmar, for example. Is this an effective method of resistance? Why or why not? Have students think of other ways to draw attention to human-rights violations. *(Sample answer: Any type of public display draws attention to issues, so activists know that by creating "public noise," change is possible. Unfortunately, violence often draws more attention because it often appeals more to public interest, which is one reason terrorists use violence. Students should be encouraged to brainstorm ways they can get what they learn out to a larger public: classmates, the school, the community, etc.)*

Biographical Connection

Once students have watched Franz Wohlfahrt's testimony and completed the activity and/or discussion questions, teachers may wish to print and hand out Franz's biographical profile to be read as a closing activity.

SUGGESTED PROMPTS: Compare and contrast how Franz'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?

Franz Wohlfahrt, Jehovah's Witness Standing Firm in Faith

Glossary

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

Anschluss² After a prolonged period of economic stagnation, political dictatorship, and intense Nazi propaganda inside Austria, German troops entered the country on March 12, 1938. They received the enthusiastic support of most of the population. Austria was incorporated into Germany the next day.

Dachau¹ Dachau was a concentration camp located near Munich, Bavaria. The first group of prisoners, consisting mainly of communists and social democrats, was brought here on March 22, 1933. During the camp's 12-year existence, the prisoner population included political opponents, criminals, Sinti and Roma ("Gypsies"), Jews, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and members of the Catholic clergy. More than 200,000 prisoners were incarcerated at Dachau during its existence. American forces liberated the camp on April 29, 1945.

Gangrene³ A medical term used to describe the death of an area of the body. It develops when the blood supply is cut off to the affected part as a result of various processes, such as infection, vascular (pertaining to blood vessels) disease, or trauma. Gangrene can involve any part of the body; the most common sites include toes, fingers, feet, and hands.

Gestapo² The German Secret State Police, which was under SS control. It was responsible for investigating political crimes and opposition activities.

Hitler Youth¹ The Nazis established the Hitler Youth (*Hitler Jugend* or HJ) organization in 1926 to teach German boys the beliefs of the Nazi Party and to transform them into a "violently active, dominating, brutal youth." Once they had been indoctrinated, Hitler Youth were highly disciplined and fanatically loyal to Hitler. During the Third Reich, the Hitler Youth became Germany's principal youth organization, and in 1936 it was made a state agency. German boys ages 14 to 18 were expected to enlist. Membership in the Hitler Youth became compulsory after 1939.

Jehovah's Witnesses¹ Established as the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society in the United States in 1884, Jehovah's Witnesses (International Bible Students) developed communities based on beliefs that broke away from mainstream Christianity. The members of the community regarded themselves as citizens

Franz Wohlfahrt, Jehovah's Witness Standing Firm in Faith

of Jehovah's Kingdom, emphasized the Old Testament, and did not swear allegiance to secular governments or serve in armed forces. Witnesses generally endorse the observance of laws in their country of residence but firmly reject the observance of laws contrary to their teachings.

Rodgau-Dieburg¹ A penal camp established in 1937 by German authorities in the area of Dieburg, Germany, southeast of Frankfurt am Main.

SA² (In German, *Sturmabteilung*; Storm Troopers) Also called "Brownshirts." Members of a special armed and uniformed branch of the Nazi Party.

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

SS² (In German, *Schutzstaffel*; Protection Squad) Units formed in 1925 as Hitler's personal bodyguard. The SS was later built into a giant organization by Heinrich Himmler. It provided staff for police, camp guards, and military units (Waffen-SS) serving with the German army.

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 http://www.emedicinehealth.com/medical-dictionary-definitions/article_em.htm

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

Extension Activities

If time permits, teachers might consider including the following additional activities:

1. The **Rev. Martin Niemöller**, a Protestant pastor who later became a vocal critic of Adolf Hitler, is largely known for his quotation, "**First they came for the...**" which has several versions but all make the point that Germans who remained silent bore some responsibility for Nazi crimes during the Holocaust. After reading the brief articles to become familiar with the Rev.

Franz Wohlfahrt, Jehovah's Witness Standing Firm in Faith

Niemöller and his quote, discuss what it might have meant if church leaders of other denominations had stood together as a community and refused to allow the Jehovah's Witnesses to be singled out for persecution. As an additional activity, research the various versions of Niemöller's quote by visiting the [Niemöller Quotation Page](#). From there students may want to search the Internet to see and share with each other how individuals and groups in modern times have used the quotation for their own causes and/or purposes, as well as discuss why the quotation has such a lasting, broad-based appeal. Teachers may want to lead a discussion on the power of words in general by comparing and contrasting Franz Wohlfahrt's poem in the student-activity handout and the Rev. Niemöller's quotation.

2. Have students debate religious freedoms. The United States was a haven for religious freedom in the 1600s. Is that still true today? For example, are there religious groups today that are not free to practice their beliefs? In terms of the military, if the draft were reinstated, should people be able to opt out because of religious beliefs? Is there historical precedence for this? Vietnam? World War I or II?
3. Research people who have stood up for their beliefs despite grave dangers and consequences. What were these people able to accomplish against seemingly insurmountable odds? Create a bulletin board or museum exhibiting these righteous people. Invite other classes in to learn about these remarkable people. Examples may include Holocaust-related individuals such as Miep Gies, the Rev. Andre Trocmè, Raoul Wallenberg, Hannah Senesh, Janusz Korczak, and Varian Fry, or others such as Mary Dwyer, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr., Alice Paul, and Ida Tarbell.
4. Encourage students to access [STAND](#), the student-led division of the Genocide Intervention Network, to see what they can do to stop human-rights violations.

Franz Wohlfahrt, Jehovah's Witness Standing Firm in Faith

References

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

1. **Jehovah's Witness: Victims of the Nazi Era:** <http://www.ushmm.org/education/resource/jehovahs/jehovahsw.php>
2. **Jehovah's Witness: Statement of Principle:** <http://www.ushmm.org/education/resource/jehovahs/jwstatement.htm>
3. **Jehovah's Witness: Declaration Denouncing Beliefs:** <http://www.ushmm.org/research/library/books/2002-05-31/declare.htm>
4. **Genocide Intervention Network:** <http://www.genocideintervention.net/>
5. **Martin Niemöller: Biography:** <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10007391>
6. **Martin Niemöller: "First They Came for the Socialists ...":** <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10007392>
7. **Niemöller Quotation Page:** <http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/niem.htm>
8. **Student-Led Division of Genocide Intervention Network:** <http://www.standnow.org/>

Additional Resources

To learn more about Jehovah's Witnesses during the Holocaust, teachers and students may consult the following online sources:

1. **Documentary film: Jehovah's Witnesses: Stand Firm Against Nazi Assault:** http://www.jw-media.org/edu_videos/vcfi_e.htm
2. **Study guide for the documentary video: Jehovah's Witnesses Stand Firm Against the Assault:** <http://www.chgs.umn.edu/educational/pdf/firmStudyGuide.pdf>