

Leading a Trip to the U. S. Holocaust Memorial Museum : Pre- and Post-Trip Suggestions

The intense nature of a trip to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), both educationally and emotionally, suggests that a pre-trip orientation and post-trip discussion and/or activities may help group members better process what they have learned and experienced and provide a rich stimulus to further exploration of the Holocaust.

Pre-Trip

Orientation Session:

Explain the background of the USHMM, including why it is located in Washington, D.C. See “Architecture and Art” and “About the Museum” *

Describe the organization of the Museum by floors and what exhibits the visitor can expect to see. See “Permanent Exhibition: The Holocaust” as well as current temporary exhibitions.*

Tell students/group members that the trip may be an intense emotional experience and that reactions will vary from person to person.

For a school or youth group, include chaperones and parents in your discussion.

Including significant adults not only brings them “on board” as to the importance of the visit, but sets the stage for their support and interest after the trip.

* Explore the USHMM website for detailed information -- <https://www.ushmm.org>

You may also download a free app “Visit USHMM” for iPhones and iPads through iTunes. Includes background, map, passports as well as important artifacts representing significant historical themes in the Museum.

Suggestions for Pre-trip Educational Programing:

For trips which are not part of an ongoing course on the Holocaust, the teacher/group leader might refer to the USHMM website under “Information for Students” and “Learning Materials and Resources” including maps, glossary, and important primary documents. “Timeline of Events” provides important preparation for the teacher/group leader.

Educators incorporating their visit into a specific lesson plan or unit may ask their students to list questions they have about the Holocaust before the trip and then have a post-trip discussion of the answers (or further questions). Another focus for the visit is to assign one or two questions to individuals or to small groups. Upon the group’s return, each person or group would report their findings.

Possible questions, which are examined in Museum exhibits, include:

- What was Jewish life like in Europe before 1933?
- How did the Nazi party come to power?
- What steps did the Nazis take to limit the civil rights, work and professional opportunities, education, cultural and social life of the Jews of pre-war Germany?
- Could the European Jews emigrate to safety in other countries? What problems were involved?
- What was the Nazi view of "race"?
- What did the Nazi government do to influence the "Aryan" peoples of Germany to accept their view of the Jews and other "undesirables"?
- What peoples were victimized by the Nazis?
- What is a "bystander"? Cite some examples.
- What is a "collaborator"? Cite some examples.
- What was the step-by-step process toward the goal of the Final Solution?
- What evidence did you see of conditions during the deportations and in the ghettos and concentration camps?
- In what ways did the Jews and others persecuted by the Nazis show resistance to dehumanization and to death?
- What are some examples of individuals, groups, and nations who resisted the Nazis and how did they accomplish their goals?
- In what ways did the United States help the persecuted peoples of Nazi-occupied Europe? In what ways was the United States inactive?
- Could the persecuted European Jews go to Palestine? What were the problems involved?
- Who liberated the concentration camps? Did they know what they would find?
- What happened to the survivors of Nazi persecution immediately after the war? Where did they live?
- What happened to the Nazi officials, SS members, and other perpetrators responsible for implementing the Final Solution?

Post-Trip

It is recommended that groups visiting the SHMM have an opportunity to discuss their reactions to this complex informational and emotional experience.

Experience has shown that many visitors, children and adults alike, have delayed reactions and may not be able to express their feelings immediately. By providing an opportunity for a group meeting, participants are encouraged to share both responses and questions, which is both supportive and clarifying.

We recommend that a post-trip discussion be held as soon as possible after returning so that group members can process some of their complicated responses to this sensitive and painful experience. Some groups have had success debriefing on the bus during the trip home if a microphone is available, but many visitors use this time to collect their thoughts, have quiet conversation, or move to light-hearted interchange which permits them to temporarily separate from the intensity of the experience.

Guidelines for Group Discussion:

Use a large-circle format for your group meeting.

Open with a general statement, such as, "After last week's visit to the USHMM, let's take some time to share our thoughts and feelings about what we found . . ."

Acknowledge the uniqueness of each person's reactions -- no right or wrong answers.

Facilitate the discussion, if necessary, by asking open-ended questions, such as, "What information/exhibit surprised you or was new information for you?" "On the bus ride back, did you find yourself thinking about any aspects of the trip?" "Did you talk about your experience when you came home?"

Hearing and verbalizing disquieting feelings may cause some anxiety among some participants and may result in silences, seeming indifference, or uncomfortable laughter. But your open-ended questions and nonjudgmental acceptance of their responses, as well as the comments from other group members, will encourage further dialogue.

If there are silences, you might wait a short time to see if the group members will initiate a comment. If not, ask another open-ended question or offer one of your own observations, such as, "I had never heard of the White Rose group before, or considered that the German civilians had organized resistance to the Nazis."

You may encourage the more reticent members of the group but do not pressure them to speak. For some, hearing others' comments might stimulate later introspection.

Acknowledge the discomfort felt when people are left with difficult or unanswered questions, such as the response of the Western nations or the role of the Judenräte.

Let the group know that later questions can be brought to another group discussion or to the teacher/leader individually.

Additional Questions for Group Discussion or Research Projects:

What would you want other people to know about the Holocaust?

What other genocides have occurred since 1945? How do you understand this?

What would you want world leaders to do to prevent another genocide? To prevent other violations of human rights?

What can *you* do right now?

Additional Post-trip School Projects:

Creative writing or art projects provide another way of processing this complex experience. In addition to sharing projects in class:

Students might exhibit their work in their school, public library or house of worship.

Students in grades 7-12 may submit them to the Mordechai Anielewicz Creative Arts Competition in the Philadelphia area. For further information, see "Holocaust Programming" at <https://jewishphilly.org>

The group might develop a presentation or commemorative service at the time of Kristallnacht (November 9-10), International Day of Remembrance (January 27) or Yom HaShoah/Days of Remembrance (annual spring dates provided on USHMM website).