

The “Games” People Play

The Dangers of Holocaust Simulations and Thought Experiments in Nathan Englander’s and Ellen Umansky’s Short Stories

Sabrina Völz

Abstract

According to a 2018 survey conducted by The Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, “over one-fifth of Millennials (22%) haven’t heard or are not sure if they have heard of the Holocaust.” Since the publication of that study, calls for Holocaust-mandated education have been intensifying. Some academics and teachers have advocated the use of simulations to create empathy for Holocaust victims and survivors. However, sensitive subjects such as the Holocaust must be taught with great care, keeping sound, age-appropriate pedagogical goals in mind. Otherwise, it may do more harm than good. This article discusses two early twenty-first-century Holocaust-themed short stories which serve as stern warnings about the potential dangers and lasting effects of irresponsible Holocaust pedagogy. In Ellen Umansky’s “How to Make it to the Promised Land” (2003) and Nathan Englander’s “What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank” (2013), characters engage in “what if” scenarios by playing seemingly harmless Holocaust “games” that take a dark turn and conclude with unsettling revelations. While the stories are works of fiction, the analog “games” described in both narratives are loose adaptations of actual games that Umansky and Englander played as teens.

Suggested Citation: Völz, Sabrina. “The ‘Games’ People Play: The Dangers of Holocaust Simulations and Thought Experiments in Nathan Englander’s and Ellen Umansky’s Short Stories.” *JAAAS: Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies* 3, no. 1 (2021): 159–178, DOI: [10.47060/jaaas.v3i1.25](https://doi.org/10.47060/jaaas.v3i1.25).

Keywords: American short stories; Jewish American identity; Frank, Anne; empathy; pedagogy; Holocaust survivors

Peer Review: This article was reviewed by two external peer reviewers.

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Sabrina Völz

Several decades after World War II, the dedication to, and examination of, Holocaust education extends far beyond North America and Europe. In 2000, forty-six governments signed the Declaration of the Stockholm International Forum, an important document that declares support for Holocaust education and an annual Holocaust Memorial Day. Recent surveys published on Holocaust awareness in the U.S. have only supported the urgency of that call. According to a 2018 study conducted in the United States by The Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, “over one-fifth of Millennials (22%) haven’t heard or are not sure if they have heard of the Holocaust.”¹ And a 2020 Pew Research Center study found that “fewer than half [of adults] can correctly answer multiple-choice questions about the number of Jews who were murdered or the way Adolf Hitler came to power.”²

As an increasing number of Holocaust survivors pass away, the fear of forgetting coupled with concerns about Jewish secularism have led rabbis, educators, scholars, and writers to discuss how the lessons of the Holocaust as well as the memory of its victims and survivors might best be preserved and most effectively conveyed to new generations. This study examines these concerns as well as the discussion on Jewish American identity and Holocaust simulation pedagogy as they pertain to Ellen Umansky’s “How to Make it to the Promised Land” (2003) and Nathan Englander’s “What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank” (2013). In both short stories, which reference Anne Frank, characters engage in “what if” scenarios by playing seemingly harmless Holocaust “games” that take a dark turn and conclude with unsettling revelations. In Umansky’s story, the insecure teenage narrator, Lizzie, is forced to participate in an ill-conceived Holocaust activity at a Jewish summer camp. Instead of helping her to understand her Jewish identity

and history, the role-play leads the narrator to betray a friend to save her own life in that simulated environment. Englander's short story gives readers a glimpse into Holocaust consciousness in the United States today and treats the lasting impact of overzealous Holocaust education on Jewish identity. In Englander's story, yeshiva school attendance has influenced Debbie, one of the four main characters, to believe that another Holocaust is likely to happen. She regularly takes part in the "Anne Frank Game," which is a thought experiment centering on the question of whose Gentile neighbors and friends would hide Jews in the event of another Holocaust. When played with her husband and an Orthodox Jewish couple, the seemingly innocent "game" exposes one character's complicity, a revelation that silences all participants.

The literature on Holocaust education overwhelmingly sides with those who condemn or reject Holocaust simulations and role-plays over those few who maintain their relevance and usefulness.³ In general, history simulations and role-playing games seek to capture student interest, train critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and develop empathy for victims. For example, Jaqueline Glasgow's role-play for young adults aims to assist students in "understand[ing] the gravity of the decisions Jewish family members made when they heard the Nazi deportation plan."⁴ The "game" is one suggested expansion activity to Lois Lowry's *Number the Stars* (1989), a book for young readers aged 9 to 10 based on the Danish rescue of Jews.

Glasgow's 2006 Holocaust role-play overlooks fundamental didactic principles. The directions to the role-play lacking all contextualization are sparse: participants learn of the resistance's warning to flee the imminent deportation of Jews. Students must then decide what to do. In groups of five, they each adopt one of the following roles: "Father (decision maker), Mother (caregiver), Son (age 16, somewhat independent), Daughter (age 8, remains silent), Daughter (11-month-old whose crying may give them away)."⁵ In any context, "playing" gender stereotypes is harmful and only serves to perpetuate them: "Discriminatory social norms and stereotypes reinforce gendered identities and determine power relations that constrain women's and men's behaviour in ways that lead to inequality."⁶ Since the role-play was created by "four students... in a teaching methods class," it could have been used as a learning tool to unmask bias and deconstruct stereotypes.⁷ Instead, it appears in a "best practice" article without critical commentary.

Next, the activity trivializes Jewish experience. The first choice the father must make is formulated in only three words: run, hide, or stay. The students must then blindly choose one alternative with a pre-determined outcome without any further information, such as the place they might try to hide or the city they might try to escape to. Depending on their first choice, students make two to three additional decisions with a total of six possible outcomes. In reality, Jews had to take dozens of

factors into consideration and may have had to make hundreds of small decisions. Another major problem with this type of activity is that it may appear to some students to place the responsibility of the family's fate on the father (or the Jews themselves) instead of on the Nazis and their murderous machinery. Finally, what-if scenarios are artificial; it is impossible to know what decisions people would actually make until they are truly confronted with them.

In the end, it is unclear what Glasgow's students purportedly learned from, or how they felt about, the experience because neither actual results nor suggested answers to the debriefing are provided. As far as I can tell, the failure to include students' reactions and takeaways seems to be characteristic of much of the "best practice" literature on Holocaust role-plays as well as some teacher-created materials about the Holocaust for purchase by global, for-profit education organizations, a topic addressed in the last section of this essay. By contrast, Umansky's and Englander's focus on the role-play participants' perspectives, takeaways, and the trauma destructive Holocaust education causes them. These stories may be used as a means for sensitizing readers to the limitations of extreme forms of emotionally-based pedagogy.

Ellen Umansky's "How to Make it to the Promised Land" was inspired by a game that she played at summer camp. It involved Russian draft evaders trying to escape to the U.S. or Israel in the 1980s. In a note on her narrative, Umansky explains that fiction allows her to explore how an outsider at Jewish camp "would make sense of the Holocaust, how such horrors would, or wouldn't be assimilated into their lives."⁸ Although her satirical short story has not previously garnered much scholarly interest, it has appeared in several anthologies and did attract the attention of Film Director Sam Zalutsky. His adaptation of Umansky's short story into a high-quality short film appeared in 2014. In "How to Make it to the Promised Land," there are eleven underlying mistakes that the camp leadership makes when constructing a Holocaust role-play for summer campers.

"How to Make it to the Promised Land" begins in medias res and is narrated by fifteen-year-old Lizzie Lenthem, who attends "Camp Shalom" in California in 1999. The Israeli-American narrator has grudgingly agreed to spend her summer at "Jew-camp hell."⁹ In contrast to the other campers, who have been attending the camp for years, Lizzie is a newcomer who has little to no background in Judaism, sealing her fate as an outsider.

As the story opens, instead of playing sports or doing arts and crafts, the campers are informed about a role-playing game (RPG) in which they are compelled to participate. Two-thirds of the teens are to be Polish Jews living in the Lodz ghetto on November 1, 1940. Their aim is to avoid deportation, while the remaining

campers assume the identities of Polish or German officials or SS guards. Enablers, indifferent bystanders, resisters, and other non-Jewish victims of persecution—including Sinti and Roma, LGBTQ persons, Catholics, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and people with disabilities—find no place in the Holocaust RPG. Simplifying history by placing campers into two opposing groups marks the first didactic limitation and perpetuates thinking in terms of binaries.

The day after the “game” is announced, the campers are stripped of their own identities and handed ID cards with a picture of their character and basic information about their character’s name as well as marital and family status. Based on that information, the participants anticipate value judgments and survival strategies employed by Jewish individuals in that context. The secular Jewish narrator assumes the role of twenty-one-year-old Anya Ossevsheva, mother of four children. The story alludes to the ID cards offered to visitors as they enter the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s Permanent Exhibition. In that space, each visitor who accepts one of the six hundred cards intended to personalize history learns about the biographies of actual people, facts about their life before and during the Holocaust as well as their fate. Some survive, while others do not.

In Umansky’s short story, Lizzie and her fellow campers receive much less information than the cards the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) provides, ensuring superficial identification at best and a trivialization of Jewish suffering during the Holocaust at worst.¹⁰ Robert M. Prince lists different variables that affect the uniqueness of each Holocaust victim’s or survivor’s story: “life before persecution, specificity of experience, hiding, passing, conditions of concentration camp internment, physical suffering, losses of family, iconic experiences. . . . Other variables affecting the characteristics of survivors include conditions of life post liberation, renewed persecution, opportunities, disappointments and the same vicissitudes of fortune that determined survival.”¹¹

Both the simulation’s claim to historical reality and the neglect of possible variables that influenced Jewish victims’ chances of survival represent the RPG’s second and third weaknesses. Moreover, the teens are neither given a choice whether they want to participate, nor do the camp leaders consider the damaging psychological effects that this affective activity may have on sensitive individuals, representing mistakes four and five. They further fail to adhere to didactic warnings that prohibit the assigning of roles that “represent real-life oppression (racial or gender lines, for example)” to young people,¹² a sixth limitation.

Without properly discussing the reasons for or the objectives of the curious form of entertainment (a seventh flaw in the RPG), Camp Director Bobby Z. simply tells the campers: “You’re lucky to be here in America. All of us are. For just one day we’d

like you to pretend otherwise.”¹³ Although left unstated, Bobby Z.’s explanation of the RPG rules seems to evoke commonly held American perspectives on the Holocaust, which interpret Hitler’s rise to power and the state-sanctioned mass murder as an affective educational opportunity for moral and civic development. For this group, as Pascale R. Bos explains, the Holocaust is interpreted as “a failure of democratic institutions from which one can learn . . . to have compassion for the victims in the hope that this breeds better citizens and prevents future genocides.”¹⁴ Evoking America as “the promised land” in this context is to be viewed with caution and as an eighth weakness of the RPG. It is a well-known fact that the United States did little to support the efforts of Jews trying to escape from Nazi-controlled Europe, deportation to concentration camps, and later war-torn Europe.¹⁵ Instead of dealing with reasons for the Holocaust, America’s initial indifference to Nazi persecution of European Jews, and the deeper meaning of the Holocaust for Jewish American identity today, the camp leadership creates an ill-conceived simulation activity that provides no proper pedagogical, historical, or cultural contextualization.

Historically speaking, Lodz—officially known as Litzmannstadt during Nazi rule—was completely sealed off from the outside world on April 20, 1940. The time for attaining visas to other countries, therefore, had long expired by November 1, 1940, the day the RPG takes place. In contrast to other ghettos, in which some Jews could conduct business or be sent to work in non-Jewish parts of town during the day, Lodz effectively was a heavily patrolled “permanent prison.”¹⁶ An empty corridor or “no-man’s land between the Jewish quarter and the ‘Aryan’ part of the city” had been established, circumstances complicated by the local ethnic German minority’s loyalty to the Nazis. Consequently, virtually no news from the outside managed to seep through. Any activity suggesting that escape from Lodz Ghetto in November 1940 was possible is not only misleading but also without historical foundation, a ninth flaw.

While some campers blindly follow authority and immediately embrace the RPG by trying to locate family members and friends, an odd camper nicknamed “Kron” voices the central question of the story: “How are we supposed to remember what we never knew in the first place?”¹⁸ In other words, how are young people, two or more generations removed from the Holocaust with no direct or only a distanced familiar connection to that genocide, supposed to overcome their estrangement to, or ignorance about, the Holocaust, especially if they do not identify with Judaism or if they have not been brought up as Jews? The suffering of Holocaust victims and survivors is particularly unimaginable for Lizzie, who “once asked an old woman on a Santa Monica beach if the numbers tattooed on her arm were her phone number.”¹⁹ Being Jewish does not ensure that Jewish Americans automatically understand history and feel compassion for Holocaust survivors, just as Holocaust education in school does

not guarantee that students are informed or curious about the Holocaust, as the surveys mentioned above illustrate.

As the “game” progresses, the two misfits—Lizzie and Kron—protest the activity by going into hiding as a number of European Jews did to avoid deportation. They seek refuge in the desecrated synagogue/kitchen off-limits to campers. Unlike Anne Frank, who “survived years in an attic, barely talking above a whisper,” the two resisters are soon discovered and split up, but not before Kron comically vomits at will and is sent to the infirmary. Orna, a camp counselor, goads Lizzie into participating in the RPG, questioning her identity as a Jew if she does not: “‘Whatsa matter, Lizzie?’ a voice says. ‘You afraid of being a Jew?’”²⁰ For Orna, Jewishness seems fixed in the past, in mass historical trauma, a position not shared by all Jews. For Rabbi Micha Odenheimer, Jewish identity is instead “rooted in culture, tradition or customs that can be lived, enjoyed, and celebrated.”²¹ The latter view is absent from the story and adds to the narrative’s satirical force.

As the tension mounts, Lizzie is escorted back to the game, where she learns that some campers have mysteriously disappeared and that Bobby Z is collecting real money at the gate to freedom. The line between play-acting and reality has become blurred. While waiting for a visa, Lizzie begins to think about the character whose identity she has assumed: “I wonder what her life was like. . . . I think of those train tracks, skin stretched thin over bones, and those in my family who never made it out. I won’t let that happen to me.”²² In this passage, Lizzie’s engagement with Anya’s photo stirs up memories of the teen’s own family history. Recalling stories of deportation and horrific photographs of emaciated concentration camp prisoners, Anya’s image comes to life. Historical photographs of a harrowing past serve as “ghostly revenants from an irretrievably lost past world,” which enables its observer, “in the present, not only to see and to touch the past but also try to reanimate it by undoing the finality of the photographic ‘take.’”²³ Surviving photographs of Holocaust victims defeat Nazi attempts to erase them and their culture. The fragmented photographic evidence testifies to the lives of individuals robbed of their existence and human dignity while speaking to the hearts and minds of their beholder.

The Holocaust is becoming real to Lizzie who exhibits signs of postmemory. The term “postmemory” refers to the connection that the decedents of Holocaust survivors have to the psychological, social, and cultural trauma of the past, which they can only “remember” through the narratives, pictures, and cultural practices. However, the survivors’ experiences were communicated to them in such a way that they appear to be actual memories. Therefore, the true mechanism by which postmemory connects to the past is not recall but rather “imaginative investment, projection, and creation.”²⁴

Those more than a generation removed from or without direct familiar ties to the Holocaust may be considered “adoptive witnesses” if they experience the Holocaust through the lens of survivor trauma as if those memories were their own.²⁵ As an adoptive witness, Lizzie imagines what is not actually pictured on Anya's photo: “skin stretched thin over bones.” Lizzie recalls the disturbing images imprinted in her memory as if she were directly in danger: “I won't let that happen to me.”²⁶ Shaken by postmemory, with tears in her eyes, Lizzie may not pass into the promised land, she must find another means of escape.

After a traumatic run-in with a camper enthusiastically playing a guard, who throws the narrator to the ground and repeatedly defiles her with the racial epithet “Jew,” Lizzie eventually escapes the physical and mental assault at the cost of losing her dignity and her shoes. Forced to walk barefoot on jagged rocks, she is literally and metaphorically losing her footing when she exclaims: “This fucked-up game isn't funny anymore.”²⁷ It should further be noted that the guard, “played” by a Jewish American camper, is asked to personify a perpetrator, the tenth questionable aspect of the RPG.

The scene is reminiscent of Philip Zimbardo's controversial 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE), which set out to study whether American prison guards' brutality stems from sadistic personalities or their situational environment. After submitting to a psychological profile, volunteers who showed no abnormal disposition to authoritarian behavior were randomly assigned roles as guards or prisoners in a mock prison. Within six days, the psychological and physical abuse of prisoners became so grave that Zimbardo abruptly ended his study. Consequentially, filling authoritarian roles with life—as the SPE suggests—may lead to unexpected or even horrific outcomes. Responsible simulation pedagogy stipulates that students have “the permission to act in response to evil, rather than being forced to embody it.”²⁸

When faced with further decision-making required by the RPG, Lizzie struggles with complicity as well. In the next episode, she stumbles upon the chaotic amphitheater in which people are bartering for their freedom. Refusing to trade her actual grandmother's earrings for safe passage, the narrator instead finds herself selling out her associate Kron: “I want out so badly. I feel as if I'm peering over the edge of a cliff when I say, ‘What if I have information on a fugitive?’”²⁹ Betraying her only ally at camp for the sake of her own survival, Lizzie's dark side of human nature is revealed.

With a visa in hand, Lizzie happens to meet Jesse, whose character in the “game” turns out to be Moishe Ossevsheva, Anya's husband. Although Jesse already has a girlfriend, he previously showed interest in Lizzie. The confused narrator is simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by him. Using Moishe and Anya's marital status as an excuse to mess around, Jesse makes aggressive sexual advances to which Lizzie

reluctantly falls prey: “And his lips are on mine and he’s right but oh so wrong and I feel both small and large, beautiful and grotesque, so unlike myself that I’m not sure I’m even there. . . . I don’t want to think about Kron and Anya, but they’re all I see. I’m horrible and I’ll do anything.”³⁰

Feelings of passion are out of place amid a Holocaust RPG. Still, they represent an irrational reaction to the immense stress and guilt Lizzie is emotionally unable to handle.³¹ She vacillates between extremes: right and wrong, small and large, beautiful and grotesque. As Liora Gubkin comments, “When the boundaries of self are violated, trust in both self and world are diminished, and with them the certainties of knowledge.”³² Traumatized, Lizzie’s confused sense of self causes her to lose control and behave in a way that she would not under normal circumstances. The Holocaust RPG would be difficult for anyone to handle, but it is particularly overwhelming for Lizzie, a teen in the midst of her parent’s separation, a teen insecure about her social and religious identities.

In the final paragraphs of the narrative, the rising tension reaches its climax before abruptly falling as the story finds closure. The romantic interlude mentioned above turns sour when Jesse begins to worry that his girlfriend will catch him cheating. Lizzie spitefully takes the ID out of his pocket: “‘You don’t even have a visa, Jew. This isn’t going to get you far.’ My voice trembles. . . . ‘You thought you were going to touch me? You and your dirty Jewish ways?’ . . . ‘Jew,’ I practically coo. ‘Now why would I ever have married a Jew like you?’”³³ Caught between reality and the RPG, the narrator destroys Jesse’s ID as he walks away. Using the slur “Jew,” Lizzie attempts to assert her power over her role-play spouse and humiliate him by exhibiting behavior that reveals a troubled relationship to her own identity.

Haunted by postmemory, her betrayal of Kron, and the anti-Semitic act of revenge against Jesse, the Holocaust RPG has shaken the unwilling participant to the core: “I look at my own ID one last time, at that face, those eyes, so familiar, staring back at me, and I am dizzy with recognition. Carefully, I tear the green slip of paper apart. Anya’s face becomes speckles on the rocks in the drying creek. As much as I wish it were otherwise, the speckles remain; there isn’t enough of the stream to carry them away.”³⁴ Lizzie could have actually “won” the game with a visa in hand, but she instead destroys her ID and defiantly ends the RPG. With that act of self-determination, the story ends. Lizzie destroys the card, but the lasting speckles of memory remain. The RPG will haunt the narrator—and readers—for some time to come. The RPG has elicited Lizzie’s deep identification with and empathy for Anya, but it simultaneously triggers postmemory.

The RPG has failed to further an appreciation for American citizenship, actual events, and Jewish American identity. Instead, Lizzie has become both victim and

offender, two opposing roles with which she will have to come to terms. The “lesson” Lizzie learns is that she has the inherent ability to injure others: “I’m horrible and I’ll do anything.”³⁵ This kind of realization that might well emerge from participating in RPGs is potentially “deeply scarring and psychologically harmful,” the eleventh shortcoming of this simulation.³⁶ Gubkin echoes the sentiment, warning against “‘wound[ing] the mind’ through intentional, sustained attention to understand acts of extreme violence that violate the integrity of the self.”³⁷

Umansky’s story implicitly asks more questions than it answers: What did the unidentified initiators of the Holocaust RPG hope to gain by forcing vulnerable Jewish teens to participate? What led and leads ordinary people to ignore or suppress their empathy for fellow humans to become part of the machinery of hatred? What is the relationship between the Holocaust and Jewish American identity today? How should the Holocaust in all its complexity be remembered and taught to new generations? These questions and others that students produce after discussing the story can serve as a basis for further inquiry and research.

“How to Make it to the Promised Land” will leave most readers with the distinct impression that attempting to evoke victim identification through a Holocaust role-playing game is likely to blunder: “No simulation, or visit to a museum or an historical site can come close to the actual thoughts and feelings of Holocaust victims, of slaves in the time of Lincoln, or of soldiers in the Roman Empire.”³⁸ As Holocaust educator Pascale R. Bos explains: “In actuality, a deep form of identification that would take on the experiences of Holocaust victims would be unbearable and unmanageable for students.”³⁹ In their Holocaust teaching guidelines, the USHMM also warns that Holocaust simulation exercises are “pedagogically unsound. The activities may engage students, but they often forget the purpose of the lesson and, even worse, they are left with the impression that they now know what it was like to suffer or even to participate during the Holocaust.”⁴⁰ In addition to asking some students to identify with anti-Semitic perpetrators, simulations may encourage negative views of victims.⁴¹ While the theme of questionable Holocaust education does not play a central role in Englander’s “What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank,” it does serve as the basis for one of the character’s unhealthy Holocaust fixation.

Englander grew up in an Orthodox Jewish community on Long Island and attended yeshiva school, where he was instructed that another Holocaust was imminent. In an interview with Terry Gross, Englander explains that even though his family has been living in the United States for four or five generations, because of his religious education, he regularly lived in a state of fear. This fear led him to have a mindset similar to that of a survivor’s child. Like Umansky, the idea for the story stems from an actual “game” Englander played:

And we [Englander and his sister] would play this game, . . . wondering who would hide us. And this is—this story I’ve been carrying in my head from 20 years ago. But I remember what my sister said about a couple we knew. She said, he would hide us and she would turn us in. And it struck me so deeply, and I put it on the neighbors in this story. But I just couldn’t shake that thought for all these years because it’s true. . . . So I guess—in a sense, . . . it’s normality, this game. And I just took a step back and said my God, we’re pathological.⁴²

The fear instilled in Englander as a child, the “game,” and his sister’s words inform his story “What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank.” The three elements are rearranged and blended with the familiar storyline in Raymond Carver’s “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” (1981). In Carver’s famous short story, two couples sit around a kitchen table while talking about the meaning of love and drinking too much gin until there is a long devastating silence. In Englander’s version, two middle-aged Jewish couples, one Hasidic and the other secular, sit around a table drinking vodka and smoking pot. The binge ends with the couples “playing” the “Righteous Gentile game,” otherwise known as “The Anne Frank game,” followed by ominous silence.⁴³

At the beginning of Englander’s story, the comical verbal sparring between the opinionated narrator and his ultra-Orthodox visitor, Mark, generates considerable tension. Mark, who prefers his Jewish name “Yerucham” or “Yeri,” and his wife, Shoshana, formerly named Lauren, left the United States for Israel twenty years ago. When Shoshana meets the narrator’s wife, Debbie, for a reunion after many years of separation, the husbands exchange sarcastic remarks packaged as insult humor and pass judgment on the other couple’s interpretation of Judaism. Yeri initiates the confrontational banter by lecturing the others on Israeli occupation immediately upon arrival to the Floridian couple’s home. He repeatedly indicates his disapproval for secular Jews. At one point, he comically refers to the narrator’s sixteen-year-old son, as “Rumpleforeskin” because Yeri assumes that his hosts’ son has yet to be circumcised.⁴⁴ As Roberta Rosenberg posits, “Religion and nationality combine to make Yuri’s worldview a confrontational dualism (‘us’ vs. ‘them’)—those who are ‘real’ Jews . . . and those who are not.”⁴⁵ In Englander’s story, aggressive humor reveals and ridicules the disunity and bickering among Jews in society today. Sociologist Arlene Stein, for instance, likens “conversations that occur in Jewish communities” to “a cacophonous mix of discordant voices.”⁴⁶

The strained atmosphere starts to improve when the couples begin to drink alcohol, and Yeri recounts his father’s encounter with a fellow Holocaust survivor in a locker room of a local country club. The identification numbers assigned to the two men at Auschwitz are just three digits apart, indicating that they were literally at the same place and time when they were tattooed. Instead of sharing a story of trauma

and reunion, as the narrator's wife longs for, the two men incongruously make light of the situation, exemplifying Jewish survival humor. Yeri's father quips, "All that means is, he cut ahead of me in line. There same as here. This guy's a cutter, I just didn't want to say." "Blow it out your ear," the other guy says. And that's it." Clearly, Debbie's obsession with, and her desire for, authentic Holocaust narratives is unhealthy: "She was expecting something empowering. Some story with which to educate [her son] Trevor, to reconfirm her belief in the humanity that, from inhumanity forms."⁴⁷ Whereas Debbie furthers the notion firmly rooted in American pedagogy that positive or uplifting universal lessons can be drawn from the Holocaust,⁴⁸ Yuri criticizes the idea of the Holocaust as the sole basis for religious identity: "You can't build Judaism only on the foundation of one terrible crime."⁴⁹ Yuri's concern seems to apply to Debbie's identity more than he knows.

The Holocaust is not directly part of Debbie's family history; she is several generations removed both geographically and spiritually from European Jewry. Yet according to the narrator, she does not view it that way: "It's like she's a survivor's kid, my wife. It's crazy, that education they give them. Her grandparents were all born in the Bronx, but it's like, I don't know. It's like here we are twenty minutes from downtown Miami, but really it's 1937 and we live on the edge of Berlin."⁵⁰

Although Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory is usually applied to the children of Holocaust survivors, Debbie's experience—like Lizzie's—does reflect Hirsch's concept. Even as an ethnic Jew who lacks direct familial ties to fragmented Holocaust memories, Debbie may be an "adoptive witness."⁵¹ She seems, however, to have "traumatic recall but (unlike posttraumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove," resulting from other mediated experiences and cultural memory.⁵² For Debbie, delayed intergenerational transmission of past traumatic experiences has become the primary factor affecting her identity so that she directly identifies with the reality of the Holocaust as if it had directly happened to her. Her preoccupation with the Holocaust seems to be a product of yeshiva education, as alluded to in the narrator's statement above.

Debbie is likely a victim of the "shock and awe" approach to Holocaust education, a term used to describe extreme teaching methods that introduce students to the horrors of genocide.⁵³ The purpose is to generate strong emotions that deepen empathy and further moral responsibility, thereby reducing radical attitudes.⁵⁴ Shock and awe approaches may include, for instance, forcing students to look at photographs or watch film footage documenting crematoriums, mass murder, and malnourished prisoners at Nazi concentration camps, a practice some frustrated teachers may use in response to their students' disinterest in the Holocaust.⁵⁵ Educators at Yad Vashem explicitly warn against these practices: "Photographs displaying piles of

corpses cause learners to feel defensive and even disgust rather than empathy with the victims.”⁵⁶

The extent to which Debbie has become an adoptive witness to the Holocaust becomes evident in the episode that leads directly to the Anne Frank game. While high on marijuana, the couples begin to prance in the rain, realize they have an extreme case of the munchies, and find themselves in Debbie’s large, well-stocked pantry. Upon seeing it, Shoshana asks whether Debbie is “expecting a nuclear winter.” Poking fun at his wife’s obsession, the narrator explains that it is their “secret hiding place.”⁵⁷ Debbie’s stockpile of large amounts of supplies is the result of postmemory, of the affective “imaginative investment” Hirsch describes.⁵⁸ In other words, the fear of a second Holocaust has led Debbie to prepare for the worst, for going into hiding if necessary.

Next, the pantry discussion leads the couples to “play” the Anne Frank game that Debbie has apparently participated in since her childhood. The rules stipulate that the participants must consider which of their Christian friends would hide them in the event of an American Holocaust. The narrator begins by using their neighbors across the street as an example. The husband, Mitch, would “lay down his life for what’s right,” but the wife would not. It is now Debbie’s turn. Though her marriage is less than perfect, she agrees that her husband would save her and her son, but when the time comes for Shoshana to play, she exhibits signs of a struggle: “And you can tell Shoshana is thinking of her kids, though that’s not part of the scenario. You can tell that she’s changed part of the imagining. And she says, after a pause, yes, but she’s not laughing. She says, yes, but to him it sounds as it does to us, so that he is now asking and asking. But wouldn’t I? Wouldn’t I hide you? Even if it was life and death—if it would spare you, and they’d kill me alone for doing it? Wouldn’t I?” They all know the answer but “no one will say what cannot be said—that this wife believes her husband would not hide her.”⁵⁹ With that horrific insight, the otherwise chatty characters silence themselves, and the story finds its shocking conclusion.

The seemingly innocent game that begins as a playful thought experiment metamorphoses into betrayal of the worst kind. The characters are, as Roberta Rosenberg has aptly remarked, “absurdly trapped in the attics of their own catastrophic imaginations, clearly unable to find their way out.”⁶⁰ The devout Hasidic Jew and otherwise devoted husband, who has repeatedly asserted his religious and moral superiority over his secular Jewish hosts, is revealed to be a weak hypocrite who would not even sacrifice himself for his wife, the mother of his ten children. It becomes clear to all that “devotion to Orthodox law is all he and Lauren [Shoshana] share.”⁶¹

To conclude this section, Umansky and Englander have taken unique but complementary approaches to the Holocaust in short story writing. They create charac-

ters (Lizzie and Debbie, respectively) who struggle to understand what it means to be Jewish in America today and how the Holocaust might factor into their identities. Both short stories reveal potential dangers lurking behind emotionally-based approaches to the Holocaust that promote an excessive preoccupation with the Holocaust. They also underscore the unpredictability of affective Holocaust activities on its participants and question concepts of Jewish identity that rely exclusively on the Holocaust.

As shown above, these stories are full of concerns that need to be brought to both pre-service and in-service teachers, especially those who are asked to teach about the Holocaust but who have not received formal training on the subject matter. They are likely to be well-meaning but may not be familiar with multi-perspective interpretations of Holocaust history, post-memory, or the literature dating back to the late 1970s that rejects pedagogical attempts to “experience” or imagine the Holocaust through simulations. These studies showed that affect-oriented approaches were found to leave students with a poor understanding of historical context and failed to produce better, more empathetic citizens.⁶² Additionally, it was questioned whether “emotional shock equated to ‘liberal’ indoctrination,” so that affective methods for Holocaust education were largely disregarded by the end of that decade.⁶³

It was also during the 1970s that Hans-Georg Wehling published the findings of a conference held by the Baden-Württemberg Agency for Civic Education that would later become known as the “Beutelsbacher Konsens” (“Beutelsbach Consensus”). One of its core principles prohibits the overwhelming of students to the extent that they become indoctrinated with one-sided information and thus prohibited from critically formulating an independent opinion: “It is not permissible to catch students off-guard, by whatever means, for the sake of imparting desirable opinions, thereby hindering them from ‘forming an independent judgment.’ This is the difference between political education and indoctrination. Indoctrination is incompatible with the role of a teacher in a democratic society and the generally accepted objective of making students capable of independent responsibility and maturity (*Mündigkeit*).”⁶⁴

The Beutelsbach Consensus further stipulates that teachers provide students with the necessary skills and training to be able to critically analyze political situations and to assess their own personal interests and biases. The Beutelsbach Consensus continues to serve as a minimum standard for religious and civic education in the German-speaking countries. Due to the current controversies outlined in the following section, its findings should be included in more teacher training and Holocaust education programs.

Although it is safe to say that disturbing history games and RPGs have never completely disappeared,⁶⁵ it would seem that they are starting to resurface in greater

numbers in the U.S. and beyond. In 2019, three incidents involving slavery RPG lessons caused outrage. In a fifth-grade class in New York, one teacher had her black students “play” slaves at a slave auction only to be bid on by white students, and a fourth-grade teacher in North Carolina required her students to participate in an Underground Railroad board game that would punish players by sending them back to their plantations as slaves if they took “too many wrong turns.”⁶⁶ In September 2019, a “Slave Ship” exercise in an eighth-grade social studies class in Russiaville, Indiana, which had been done for the previous five years, was met with parental resistance and canceled. The role-play “called for students to portray bound, enslaved Africans aboard a vessel returning to the Americas” in an attempt to foster empathy for the capture and transport of slaves across the Atlantic.⁶⁷

In February 2021, “Willkommen in Widerstand: Das NS-Escapegame” (“Welcome to Resistance: The NS Escape Game”), a digital escape room game for ninth- and tenth-graders in Germany, appeared on Padlet. The mission explained in an audio file set to eerie music is to free Nazi prisoners by cracking a combination padlock on the door to the room where they are being held. If caught, resisters will be executed for treason. To successfully complete the first mission, students must answer random history questions, such as when Black Friday in the U.S. was or if women in the Weimar Republic were briefly emancipated. In the second mission, resisters watch an informational video on concentration camps and then solve a puzzle. The third mission involves Nazi propaganda. No debriefing has been included.

In this anti-intellectual game named after the resistance, the resistance is neither specified geographically nor historically framed. It may even mislead students into believing that all resistance groups had the same goals. Ironically, apart from their propaganda, information on National Socialists is surprisingly absent from the “NS Escape Game.” It is also troubling that the real identity of the game’s creator—who used the moniker “Mann_mit_Klasse und Maske” and had over 6,000 Twitter followers in 2021—is unknown. His account has since disappeared but it should be noted that using teaching materials with technical gimmicks created by a person whose credentials are unknown, a person without tangible accountability is unwise.

Then, there are also those who seek to profit financially from the Holocaust through commercial computer games and escape rooms. A few examples will have to suffice. For instance, in the first-person shooter *Wolfenstein: The New Order* (MachineGames, 2014), players infiltrate a fictional Nazi concentration camp.⁶⁸ In 2017, a Czech company closed its “Auschwitz-themed ‘escape room’” due to heavy criticism.⁶⁹ In 2019, responding to international media scrutiny, another popular 60-minute escape room set in 1939 changed its name from Schindler’s List to Secret Agent. The objective for this RPG located in Thessaloniki, Greece, has remained the same: to find essential

documents, compile a list of innocents, and save some by hiring them for factory work.⁷⁰

Finally, for-profit organizations market Holocaust teaching materials, such as Teachers pay Teachers. It is a global educational platform that offers three million free and paid resources to K-12 teachers.⁷¹ A search for the term “Holocaust” revealed over 3,500 results.⁷² Although exhaustive research would go far beyond the scope of this essay, the organization does sell problematic Holocaust “games” and simulation activities, including “World War 2—What would you have done? Controversial Class Discussion!” by Creating History (“what if” scenarios made up of a few sentences that allow students only eight minutes to answer). Yet it also seems that Teachers pay Teachers’ reporting system may lead to the removal of other problematic games. *Train Ride to Auschwitz* by Haulbrook Hall a (simulation about the inhumane railcar transport and its spatial dimensions), which I reviewed in 2021, has since been removed. It is unclear to how many subscribers it was sold to before it was removed.

These select examples demonstrate that a more comprehensive interdisciplinary effort is needed to ensure that history simulations and RPGs—if used at all—have clear learning objectives. They need to be age-appropriate, include accurate contextual information, and in-depth, meaningful post-activity reflection. Teachers should consider whether their students have the emotional intelligence as well as the necessary knowledge and skills to analyze hypothetical moral dilemmas as required by the Beutelsbach Consensus. Moreover, when considering simulation or role-play activities, teachers should consult with experienced colleagues and, ideally, their school principal before using a new role-play. It would further be wise to inform parents in advance as well as allow students to voice their concerns and withdraw from activities at any time. Teachers should also avoid assigning grades to simulation, role-play, and “what-if” exercises, since it is hard to grade reflection objectively. In fact, students may behave before, during, or after the role-plays according to the way they believe their teachers want them to so that they receive the best possible grade. Furthermore, roles should also not overlap with students’ actual gender or racial characteristics, and educators should refrain from using shock-and-awe approaches that expect participants to identify with perpetrators. And most importantly, simulation and role-play exercises must avoid causing psychological harm and/or trauma to participants.

Although there are still some who argue that Holocaust simulations may be beneficial if teachers exercise caution as well as sound pedagogy,⁷³ the considerations listed above suggest that it is challenging to prepare for all eventualities. The potential pitfalls, including damage to student-teacher relationships, likely outweigh any potential benefits, especially since there are many other, less controversial ways of



achieving Holocaust learning objectives.

In the digital age, Jewish organizations and a few concerned educators cannot alone police the internet for the type of careless and destructive materials described in this essay. Creating pedagogically sound Holocaust activities and supporting Holocaust education must be a global effort. We all—students, parents, administrators, teachers, digital educational platform executives, and scholars—need to care more about the quality and use of Holocaust-themed materials and speak up when we encounter activities and games that make us feel uncomfortable. We need to proactively address these issues instead of waiting to “cancel” uninformed individuals when they produce problematic teaching materials. In particular, this article is a call for American studies programs at institutions of higher learning inside and outside the United States involved in the training of pre-service English and history teachers to seek out opportunities to raise awareness for and to participate in the discourses on affective learning. Teaching Nathan Englander’s and Ellen Umansky’s short stories may be one way of achieving those aims.

Notes

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 - 5 Glasgow, “Bearing Witness,” 81–82.
 - 6 Human Development Report Office, *Tackling Social Norms: A Game-Changer for Gender Inequalities* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2020), 6.
 - 7 Glasgow, “Bearing Witness,” 84.
 - 8 Ellen Umansky, “How to Make it to the Promised Land,” in *Lost Tribe: Jewish Fiction from the Edge*, ed. Paul Zakrzewski (New York: Perennial, 2003), 344.
 - 9 Umansky, “How to Make it,” 327.
 - 10 No information is disclosed to the campers about the origins of the cards they receive, so it is difficult to assess their authenticity. By contrast, the USHMM cards tell the stories of Holocaust victims based on memoirs and interviews with survivors about their own experiences and those of their family members. The USHMM’s exhibits and artifacts further contextualize the cards while campers in Umansky’s story receive no history lessons or supplemental information about the Holocaust. At the USHMM, visitors are in charge of their own experience. For instance, they determine when they want to visit, which parts of the museum they explore, how long they spend there, and if they use the cards or not, whereas campers are at the mercy of camp counselors.
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 - 13 Umansky, “How to Make it,” 328.
 - 14 Bos, “Empathy, Sympathy, Simulation,” 412.
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- 26 Umansky, “How to Make it,” 335.
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- 33 Umansky, “How to Make it,” 343.
- 34 Umansky, “How to Make it,” 343–44.
- 35 Umansky, “How to Make it,” 343.
- 36 Wright-Maley, “Every Social Studies Teacher Should Know,” 15.
- 37 Gubkin, “Empathetic Understanding,” 106.
- 38 Ben-Peretz and Shachar, “Role of Experiential Learning,” 21.
- 39 Bos, “Empathy, Sympathy, Simulation,” 413. See also Novick, *Holocaust in American Life*, 259–60; Ben-Peretz and Shachar, “Role of Experiential Learning,” 20–21; Anti-Defamation League, “Holocaust Education.”
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- 41 Anti-Defamation League, “Holocaust Education.”
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- 44 Englander, “What We Talk About,” 6.
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- 48 Novick, *Holocaust in American Life*, 239–63, and Bos, “Empathy, Sympathy, Simulation,” 412, heavily criticize Holocaust pedagogy that tries to extract universal lessons from the Holocaust.
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