

Lesson: Introduction

Howard Cwick, Liberator Eyewitness to History

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:

- [Buchenwald](#) and [Liberation of Nazi Camps](#) articles
- [Buchenwald Concentration Camp Spring 1945](#)
- Quotation from American photographer Dorothea Lange
- [Photo of Buchenwald Liberation](#)
- Howard Cwick's 30-minute visual history testimony
- Howard Cwick's biography
- "Eyewitness to History" 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 Howard Cwick's visual history testimony.
- To develop a basic understanding of the nature of the liberation of Nazi concentration camps at the end of World War II.
- To consider and assess the dynamic role a person can play in historical events.
- To discuss the role world citizenry can play to fight injustice and human-rights violations.

Lesson Overview

Teachers will introduce the lesson by discussing with students that the existence of concentration camps at the end of World War II was, in many cases, a surprise to U.S. soldiers, who often, quite literally, stumbled upon camps such as Buchenwald. Teachers will use the Historical Introduction section to provide a brief context of the **Buchenwald concentration camp** as well as the **Liberation of Nazi Camps**. Then, through use of Howard's testimony and the accompanying student activity, students, with teacher guidance, will consider the different roles a single person can play in historical events. Teachers are also encouraged to use the postviewing discussion questions to examine Howard'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 the articles **Buchenwald** and **Liberation of Nazi Camps** from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's *Holocaust Encyclopedia* to provide students brief background information on Buchenwald concentration camp and on liberation of camps. Students should also examine

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the [Map of Buchenwald Concentration Camp Spring 1945](#) for additional historical context.

Previewing Focus

Write on the board the following quote by Dorothea Lange, a famous American photojournalist:

“Photography takes an instant out of time, altering life by holding it still.”

Have students offer opinions on what they think the quote means and try to think of some examples of famous historical photos that have come to epitomize an event.

POSSIBLE PROMPTS: Dorothea Lange’s own famous photo of the [migrant mother during the Great Depression](#), [the flag-raising at Iwo Jima during WWII](#) or the [raising of the American flag at Ground Zero on 9-11](#) might be examples.

Then explain to students that many people also associate the Holocaust with certain photographic images they have seen in textbooks, articles, or documentaries. Project onto a screen the photo below so that students can discuss what they see and how this photo represents “taking an instant out of time.” Teachers may also show students how to examine photos by using the National Archives’ [Teaching with Documents](#) Website in conjunction with this viewing activity:



Photo courtesy of Sammlung Gedenkstätte Buchenwald

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Transition

After a discussion of the photo, which was taken during the liberation of Buchenwald, students should consider how such images came to be captured and preserved. In the case of the Holocaust, much of the photo evidence of liberation at Buchenwald and Dachau was taken by the U.S. Signal Corps, journalists, and some by American GIs themselves. Howard Cwick, an American soldier present at the liberation of Buchenwald, took his own photos of Buchenwald, some of which are included at the end of his testimony. Many decades later, his photos of Buchenwald turned him into an activist in Holocaust education.

Viewing Activity

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

“Howard Cwick was born August 25, 1923, in the Bronx, New York. In this testimony, Howard relates his experience as an American soldier who was present at the liberation of Buchenwald.”

View Howard Cwick's abridged 30-minute visual history testimony. Students should be instructed to pay close attention to the events at Buchenwald, which Howard relates, as well as thinking about his role in those events. It should be noted that teacher discretion is advised in the use of Howard's liberation photos, which are found at the end of his testimony. In combination, or as a separate activity, teachers can also prepare students to examine Howard's testimony via the discussion questions.

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

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

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Postviewing Focus

Have students gather in small groups and hand out the “Eyewitness to History” activity for students to complete. Through the activity, students should be able to better understand the relationship between people and events; for example, an eyewitness such as Howard can immediately or eventually shift or add roles, including that of activist.

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Discussion Questions

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

1. In what ways does Howard experience antisemitism in his own life? *(Sample answer: As a child, Howard and a friend were beaten up as they were leaving Hebrew school; after enlisting in the U.S. Army, Howard is asked by another enlistee to see his head in order to check for horns.)*
2. Howard says there are two faces that he will never forget. Whose faces? Why do you think he cannot forget them? *(Sample answer: One is of a man Howard killed from a distance while in battle; after they went back to the area, Howard found him, and he couldn't stop thinking about whose father or whose son he had been. The other is of a Kapo, an inmate who was put in charge of other inmates, in Buchenwald, who was killed by the other prisoners, presumably as an act of retaliation, while Howard and other GIs were present. Seeing their deaths through his own lens of conscience caused him not to forget their faces.)*
3. What are some of Howard's examples of his youth and inexperience as a GI? *(Sample answer: Howard mentions how unworldly and unsophisticated he was when he arrived in Europe. He says when he saw enemy soldiers die in the distance it was a "cold" thing, that it didn't mean anything. Another example is that although he may have heard something about how Jews were being treated, he hadn't ever heard about the existence of concentration camps.)*
4. Howard's company leader instructed Howard to take off his dog tags before the company entered Germany. Why? *(Sample answer: In the corner of his dog tag was an "H" for Hebrew, which revealed that Howard was Jewish. Howard, if captured, could be identified as a Jew by the Germans and potentially murdered as a result. This story illustrates the theme of identity: Howard sees himself as an American soldier who is Jewish but to the Germans he is a Jew first and foremost and will be treated accordingly.)*
5. How does Howard describe the two days that he spent in Buchenwald? What specific details do you remember from his testimony? *(Sample answer: Howard relates his experiences at Buchenwald in such vivid detail that we feel that he is allowing us to see them directly through his eyes and emotions. He talks of arriving at locked gates, barbed-wire, dead naked bodies stacked like cordwood, uniformed prisoners with faces like skeletons, their reaction to him, his reaction*

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to them, and a burning barracks building with bodies still inside. Howard also describes his alternating feelings of bewilderment, anger, and grief as GIs were pouring in by the hundreds, medics were assisting the ill and injured, the Kapo was being beaten to death in revenge, and people from nearby towns were being marched in to see the horrors, etc.)

6. How did Howard end up at Buchenwald? *(Sample answer: After his battalion arrived in Weimar, Howard got into a jeep, thinking he was going to headquarters— where he had been summoned. However, the jeep was instead headed toward Buchenwald. So, Howard was there as an “accidental eyewitness.”)*
7. In his testimony, Howard describes being at a liberators’ ceremony conducted the day before the dedication of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. Both he and the Holocaust survivor seated next to him felt they had been in camp “by mistake.” Explain their differences in meaning. *(Sample answer: Because Howard got into the wrong jeep, he was the only member of his unit to be present at the liberation of Buchenwald. Therefore, he felt he was literally there “by mistake.” The Holocaust survivor also felt she was there “by mistake” because the Nazi policies of persecution and genocide should never have been allowed.)*
8. Viewers of Howard’s testimony may sense his conflicting emotions as he relates the story of witnessing the death of the Kapo during the liberation of Buchenwald. Why might Howard feel so morally conflicted over this event? *(Sample answer: Although we can infer that this Kapo, who was placed by the SS in a position of authority over other camp inmates, used his position to inflict harm or abuse other prisoners, Howard knows that the Kapo was a Jew himself and therefore also a victim. Howard is uncomfortable judging the Kapo’s actions because he is unsure how he himself would have coped if placed in a similar situation. Although he did not stop fellow prisoners from exacting their revenge, he also can’t forget it. It is important that teachers point out the moral ambiguity this story illustrates, including the fact that not all Kapos used their limited ‘power’ in the same way.)*
9. How does Howard react when he finds a fellow soldier yelling at a displaced Jewish man? Why do you think Howard reacts this way? *(Sample answer: Without much thought, Howard takes out his pistol and cocks it, threatening to shoot the other soldier if he treats any other Jews without compassion. Why Howard responds in this way is open to interpretation but likely will reflect how Howard’s religious roots and life experiences, particularly in Buchenwald, prior to this moment have affected him or at least colored the lens through which he is now experiencing life.)*

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10. What does Howard mean when he says, “In my time in Germany, I never met a Nazi”? *(Sample answer: Howard is saying that he and other GIs became accustomed to hearing from the local population and perpetrators that they didn't know what was going on or that they were just following orders. In his experience, no one stood up and took responsibility for any of the events.)*
11. Inside Buchenwald, Howard experiences many moments that could be considered life-altering, such as having prisoners say that Allied forces had arrived too late or accuse him of poisoning their friend, seeing people brought in from nearby Weimar and being forced to witness what had happened in Buchenwald, and allowing another man to be killed before his eyes. How might moments like these change a person? Can becoming a witness to history affect whether you take action later on when you see other examples of injustice in the world? Explain. *(Students' answers will vary, but it is important they understand that coming face to face with inhumanity and injustice can, depending on their prior beliefs, either strengthen a person's resolve or change a person and how they view the world. Sometimes witnessing such things can move a person to become involved and try to make a difference.)*
12. Howard said, “There is the capability of hatred, and everything that goes along with it, in every one of us. And this is something that every human being has to work to suppress because I think every one of us is capable of doing horrible things...” Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not? If we all have the capability within us to be motivated by hatred to act, how can we fight hatred within us? What can be done to combat violence associated with hate? *(This is a potentially difficult question to ask, and again, students' answers will vary. It's important that students carefully consider the potential for this in all human beings, including themselves, and then to broaden it to a larger scope.)*
13. Early in his testimony, Howard speaks of his mother's dedication to charitable works and to helping others. Do you think her acts of altruism influenced Howard's worldview? Why or why not? What altruistic acts have you witnessed from the role models in your own life? *(Sample answer: Because parents often serve as their children's first models for behavior, it is likely that from a young age, Howard was influenced by his mother's acts of kindness toward others and that her actions shaped his own. Students should be encouraged to share examples of kindness they have witnessed at home, school, and in their local communities.)*

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14. How do Howard's experiences as a liberator of Buchenwald provide him the opportunity to become an eyewitness? How does Howard choose to deliver the message? What can we learn through Howard's experiences and testimony to apply to our own lives? (*Howard delivers the message of what he witnessed through photographs and through his testimony. Students should consider other ways people witness events.*)
15. How is it possible for someone with no background knowledge or context to recognize injustice and inhumanity when confronted by it? Explain your answer. How does one acknowledge those things? What factors can complicate, hinder, challenge, or make it impossible to acknowledge injustice, inhumanity, or mistreatment? (*These are difficult questions to not only ask but also to answer. Perhaps the teacher should lead this discussion and encourage critical thinking but reiterate that there are no right or wrong answers. Sometimes the process of analysis leads to discovery.*)
16. Have you ever witnessed mistreatment, injustices, or inhumanity? How did you feel as a witness to those things? (*Students' answers will vary depending on their own life experiences and backgrounds.*)
17. Consider your own present "**universe of obligation**" and construct a list of those to whom you are obligated to help. [*In doing so, most students will think first of family and friends. Encourage them to extend their universe outward in small increments: classmates, community members, etc. all the way to global thinking.*] How does getting involved or activism fit into it? Consider small choices you could make, and explain the potential for lasting effects they could have. (*Students should be encouraged to consider small decision-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, to community activism to feed the hungry, to helping those who have experienced loss, and then to national and international activism as being truly representative of a "universe of obligation."*)
18. Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Elie Wiesel, who was liberated from Buchenwald, said in his **Nobel acceptance speech**, "Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Whenever men or women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must—at that moment—become the

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center of the universe.” Explain why you think it is our responsibility as human beings to recognize when injustice or mistreatment is occurring in the world and to share that with others. How can we share that message? *(Again, students’ answers will vary according to their own life experiences and backgrounds.)*

Biographical Connection

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

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

Antisemitism² Prejudices toward Jews or discrimination against them.

Buchenwald concentration camp¹ Built in the summer of 1937 near the city of Weimar, the Buchenwald concentration camp grew to include more than 88 satellite and auxiliary camps. Buchenwald's commandants were Karl Koch (1937-1941) and Hermann Pister (1942-1945). By the end of 1944, there were 63,048 inmates in Buchenwald; the number rose to 112,000 by February 1945. The approach of the Soviet Army caused the SS to evacuate prisoners from concentration and labor camps in the east toward camps in the west, and Buchenwald became one of the destinations. In April, Pister ordered the evacuation of Buchenwald, prompting thousands to be sent on to the Mittelbau, Dachau and Flossenbürg concentration camps, as well as to the Theresienstadt ghetto. As American troops approached the camp on April 11, the SS fled; approximately 21,000 prisoners were liberated.

Displaced persons³ Tens of thousands of homeless people created by the war, including many survivors of the Holocaust, who had no home or country to which they could return.

Ich bin ein Jude –A German phrase meaning “I am a Jew.”

Judaism¹ The tenets of Judaism are outlined by the Torah. A Jew is one who is either born into the people of Israel, thus inheriting his/her status, or voluntarily converts to it. As a culture, as well as a society of laws, beliefs and faith, Judaism is based on the events recorded in the Torah, which was given to Moses and the people of Israel at Mount Sinai. Judaism follows a set of principles as outlined in the Torah. There are several movements in the Jewish religion, for example: Orthodox Judaism, Conservative Judaism, Reform Judaism, Reconstructionist Judaism, Hasidic Judaism, Ultra-Orthodox Judaism and Traditional Judaism.

Kapo² A concentration camp prisoner selected to oversee other prisoners on labor details. The term is often used generically for any concentration camp prisoner to whom the SS gave authority over other prisoners.

Kosher¹ Rules and regulations in Judaism that determine the foods that are permitted for consumption by the Jewish people. These rules also outline the process by which animals may be slaughtered and prepared.

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Liberation¹ To be freed from the control of a foreign or oppressive government.

Observant⁵ Careful in observing (as rites, laws, or customs) as in pious and religiously *observant* families

Orthodox Judaism¹ In Judaism, the term *orthodoxy* first appeared in 1795. It has been widely used since the beginning of the 19th century to differentiate it from the Reform movement. Orthodox Judaism describes a religious orientation that stresses submission to the authority of *halakhab*, i.e., the entire legal system of Judaism. Orthodoxy places strict limits on the impact that social or political forces may have upon the behavior and norms of Jewish life in any given historical context.

Shoah³ A Hebrew word meaning “catastrophe,” referring to the Holocaust

Shul⁴ Yiddish word for synagogue or Jewish house of prayer.

Wasser, wasser —A German phrase meaning “Water, water.”

Yiddish⁴ A language that combines elements of German and Hebrew.

Yiddish culture¹ Yiddish culture is a part of general Jewish culture, though it is specifically the facet that is based on the Yiddish language. Yiddish culture is an essential component of the culture and experience of Ashkenazi Jewry. It includes religious and secular literature, music, theater and folklore. Yiddish culture is the ancestral background of approximately 80 percent of the world’s Jews.

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 *Echoes and Reflections, a Multimedia Curriculum on the Holocaust*, Glossary

⁴ Florida Center for Instructional Technology A Teachers Guide to the Holocaust, Glossary

⁵ Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary 2009

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Extension Activities

If time permits, teachers might include the following activities:

1. **Brian Steidle, a former U.S. Marine, was a member of the African Union team monitoring the conflict in Darfur.** He took hundreds of photographs documenting atrocities and became a witness to history as well. Compare and contrast Howard Cwick and Brian Steidle's experiences and testimonies of how they each came face to face with man's inhumanity to man and how such witnessing turned both into activists.
2. **Research the definition and background of the word genocide, and find out how it is linked to the Holocaust.** What is the United States doing to combat genocide in other countries? What can you do to help as an active witness to genocide in today's world? Research and present real-world ways for teenagers to become involved in genocide prevention.
3. **What is a hate crime, and how does it relate to genocide?** Research organizations that combat hate crimes. What legislation has been enacted to prevent or prosecute hate crimes in your state? Find current examples of hate crimes in the United States within the past ten years—what was the result? How were those crimes prosecuted?

References

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

1. **Buchenwald:** <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005198>
2. **Buchenwald Concentration Camp Spring 1945:** <http://www.ushmm.org/lcmedia/viewer/wlc/map.php?RefId=BUC22041>
3. **Liberation:** <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?ModuleId=10005131>
4. **McRel:** <http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>
5. **Photo of Buchenwald Liberation:** http://www.buchenwald.de/fotoarchiv/image.php?f_provenienzen_0=29--1&f_orte_0=1--1&f_zeiten_0=8--0&page=1&inventarnr=253
6. **Teaching with Documents:** <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/>
7. **Elie Wiesel's Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech, December 10, 1986:** <http://www.pbs.org/eliewiesel/nobel/index.html>
8. **Sociologist Helen Fein's Concept of Universe of Obligation:** <http://www.ushmm.org/conscience/analysis/details/1995-10-24-02/fein.pdf>
9. **Brian Steidle:** <http://www.ushmm.org/conscience/alert/darfur/steidle/>

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Additional Resources

To learn more about liberation of the camps after World War II or how to fight genocide in today's world, teachers/students may consult the following online sources:

1. **STAND: the student-led division of the Genocide Intervention Network:** <http://www.standnow.org>
2. **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, library bibliography for additional resources:** <http://www.ushmm.org/research/library/bibliography/index.php?content=liberators#resources>
3. **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Committee on Conscience, "Take Action":** <http://www.ushmm.org/conscience/action/>
4. **"The Devil Came on Horseback," DVD about the genocide in Darfur (also book by the same title):** <http://www.thedevilcameonhorseback.com/>