studio 180

Our Class

Study Guide

2011

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A. Notes for Teachers

Thank you for choosing to bring your students to see *Our Class*, produced by Studio 180 Theatre in association with Canadian Stage. This Study Guide is intended to help make your class's experience as enjoyable and memorable as possible.

Our Class is inspired by Jan T. Gross's controversial book *Neighbors*, which examines how and why in 1941, the ethnic Polish inhabitants of Jedwabne, Poland, annihilated their town's Jewish population. The play deals with politically and emotionally charged subject matter including anti-Semitism, xenophobia, physical and sexual violence and genocide. Studio 180's productions often tackle such potentially sensitive topics and we have developed the following guidelines to help you lead productive pre- and post-show sessions in which all students feel safe, respected and able to contribute openly and honestly to discussion.

- Class members should agree on a set of ground rules that will steer the discussion. Ask for student input on what those principles should be. Examples of ground rules might include a commitment to confidentiality within the classroom and to respecting others, a ban on the use of slurs, and an agreement that only one person will speak at a time.

- Your class may include students from a wide variety of cultural, racial, religious and national backgrounds. Students may hold a range of political beliefs. Teachers and students must resist the urge to place members of certain racial or religious groups in the spotlight. Students will enter into the conversation as they feel comfortable.

- It is the moderator's role to establish as safe a setting as possible. Special care must be taken to ensure that students holding a majority opinion do not vilify those "on the other side" who hold a minority view. The moderator should also pose questions to the class to help keep the conversation on track.

- The point of a classroom discussion of the issues addressed in *Our Class* should not be to reach a class consensus. The goal should be to establish a forum for a free and respectful exchange of ideas.

- Please keep in mind that the better students are prepared prior to attending the play, the more they will get out of the experience. An awareness of what they are about to see will provide students with greater access to the ideas presented onstage. For this reason, this Study Guide is filled with background information and suggestions for classroom discussions and activities. We also offer a free pre-show chat in the theatre lobby that you are welcome to attend, beginning 30 minutes prior to each Wednesday matinee.

Your students' experiences of the play will be similarly heightened by effective follow-up class discussion. We offer post-show Q&A sessions after every Wednesday matinee to assist in the follow-up process, but it is important to note that students will continue to process their experiences long after they leave the theatre. If time permits, a follow-up discussion a few days later will likely be helpful and productive.

If you are interested in finding out about Studio 180's production-based workshops, please contact **Jessica** at **416-962-1800** or jessica@studio180theatre.com.

B. Teacher Response Form

Studio 180 is grateful for your feedback and strives to incorporate your suggestions into our education programming. Kindly complete this form and return it by mail to **Studio 180 Theatre, 19 Madison Ave, #2-180, Toronto, ON M5R 2S2** or by fax to **416-962-0180**. For your convenience, this form is also available online at http://studio180theatre.wufoo.com/forms/studio-180-teacherstudent-response-form/. We welcome student feedback as well, so please do not hesitate to send us student reviews, reports, projects and other responses!

Name: Subject taught:
School: Grade level(s):

1. **How did you find out about *Our Class*?**

2. **Did you find the Study Guide useful in preparing your class for the play and/or in helping to shape post-show class discussion?**

3. **Did you find the pre-show chat and/or post-show Q&A session productive and interesting?**

4. **What were some of your students' responses to the play?**

5. **Do you have any additional comments?**

C. Introduction to the Company and the Play

Studio 180 Theatre

Inspired by the belief that people can engage more fully in the world through the experience of live performance, Studio 180 strives to produce socially relevant theatre that provokes public discourse and promotes community engagement. By producing Canadian premieres, fostering new works by local playwrights and engaging in community-building and education initiatives, the company creates theatre that speaks to the world beyond the confines of the stage and moves directly into the world of action.

Studio 180's inaugural production was the critically acclaimed *The Laramie Project*, which played to sold-out houses at Artword Theatre in 2003. The success of this production led to a 2004 remount at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, earning two Dora Award nominations and selling out public and student performances. More recently, in October 2009, the company produced a one-night-only benefit performance of *The Laramie Project: 10 Years Later,* Tectonic Theater Project's epilogue to the original play based on interviews conducted 10 years after the murder of Matthew Shepard.

In 2006, Studio 180 produced the Canadian premiere of British playwright Robin Soans' *The Arab-Israeli Cookbook* at the Berkeley Street Theatre Upstairs (named "One of the Top 10 Shows of the Year!" by the *Toronto Star* and Best Ensemble of the year by the *Globe and Mail*) and in March 2008 staged *Stuff Happens* at the Berkeley Street Theatre Downstairs. As a result of the show's success with critics and audiences alike, Mirvish Productions programmed a remount in their subscription season and *Stuff Happens* enjoyed a second run in the fall of 2009 at Toronto's historic Royal Alexandra Theatre.

In October 2008, *Offensive Shadows*, by Toronto playwright Paul Dunn, ran at the Tarragon Theatre Extra Space, marking Studio 180's first world premiere of a Canadian play. The *National Post* named *Offensive Shadows* one of the best new Canadian plays of the year, and shortly thereafter Studio 180 was named "Toronto's Best Independent Theatre Company of 2008" by *NOW Magazine*.

The March 2009 production of David Harrower's *Blackbird* was another first for the company: its first production as part of the Berkeley Street Project – an ongoing partnership with Canadian Stage. The success of *Blackbird* guaranteed Studio 180's return to Canadian Stage last season with the Canadian premiere of *The Overwhelming* in March 2010 – J. T. Rogers' harrowing thriller set against the backdrop of the Rwandan genocide.

Studio 180 is also dedicated to fostering Canadian voices through support of local playwrights. For several years the company has been developing *Conviction* with Emil Sher (*Hana's Suitcase, Mourning Dove*) and it has recently begun work with award-winning playwright Hannah Moscovitch (*East of Berlin, In This World, The Russian Play*) on a play about honour killings, inspired by the tragic murder of Mississauga teen Aqsa Parvez.

Our 2010/11 season features two more firsts for us – the musical *Parade* (co-produced by Acting Up Stage Company) and *Our Class* – Studio 180's first production of a work in translation. *Our Class* is a Berkeley Street Project Initiative in association with Canadian Stage.

Our Class

Our Class is based on true events in the small northern Polish town of Jedwabne. On July 10, 1941, up to 1,600 Jews were massacred, in a pogrom that was for decades attributed to the Nazis. The repercussions, accusations and counter-accusations of blame continued long after the end of WWII. In 1998/99, an investigative TV documentary called *Sasiedzi* ("Neighbours") by Agnieszka Arnold shockingly revealed that the perpetrators were in fact Polish Roman Catholics and called into question the degree of German participation. In 2001, inspired by the documentary, Polish-born historian Jan T. Gross published a controversial book, *Neighbors*, probing further into the event. Public outcry prompted the removal of a monument blaming the Jedwabne massacre on Nazi troops and an investigation by Poland's National Remembrance Institute. In *Our Class*, which is inspired by Gross' book, Polish playwright Tadeusz Slobodzianek explores the events leading up to the pogrom and its lasting repercussions, following the fortunes of 10 one-time classmates (five Jewish and five Catholic) – amidst weddings, parades, births, deaths, emigrations and reconciliations – from one century into the next.

Prior to ever being produced in its original Polish, *Our Class* received its highly acclaimed world premier in an English language version by British writer Ryan Craig, at London's National Theatre, where it played from September 2009 to January 2010. The play premiered in Poland at Warsaw's Na Woli Theatre (where playwright Tadeusz Slobodzianek had recently become the Artistic Director) in October 2010. That same month *Our Class* became the recipient of Poland's 2010 NIKE Award – the country's top literary honour. In fact, this was the first time since the award was established in 1997 that it has gone to a play. Studio 180 Theatre's production is the North American premiere.

Tadeusz Slobodzianek – Playwright

Tadeusz Slobodzianek was born in 1955. He graduated from Jagiellonian University in Cracow in Theatre Studies. He has worked as a theatre critic, a dramaturg and a director before he started to write plays. His first, in 1980, was for children: *Historia o zebraku i osiolku* (*The Story of a Beggar and a Donkey*). His other plays include: *Car Mikolaj* (*Tsar Nikolai*, 1985), *Obywatel Pekosiewicz* (*Citizen Pekosiewicz*, 1986), *Turlajgroszek* (*The Pea-Roller,* 1990 Fringe First Award at the Edinburgh Festival) with Piotr Taszuk, *Prorok Ilya* (*Prohet Ilya*, 1991), *Merlin* (1992, Fringe First Award), *Kowal Malambo* (*Malambo the Blacksmith*, 1992), *Sen pluskwy* (*A Bug's Dream*, 2001) and *Nasza klasa* (Our Class, 2007). In 2003 Tadeusz Slobodzianek founded Laboratorium Dramatu (Drama Laboratory) in Warsaw, where some of Poland's most successful playwrights have developed their work. He is currently the Artistic Director of Na Woli Theatre in Warsaw and he has opened The School of Drama, where he teaches playwriting for students.

Ryan Craig – Writer, English version

Award-winning British playwright Ryan Craig writes for TV, radio and theatre where his original plays and translations have been produced at some of the finest theatres across the UK. His original plays include *The Glass Room*, *What We Did to Weinstein* (nominated for the Charles Wintour Award for Most Promising Playwright), *Broken Road* (Winner of a Fringe First Award at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival), *Happy Savages* and *The Sins of Dalia Baumgarten*. His translation of *Portagal* played at London's National Theatre and his adaptation of the novel *Vintage Stuff* toured the UK.

D. Attending the Performance

Prior to the day of the performance, please ensure that your students are well prepared. The better prepared they are, the more they will get out of the experience. The following guidelines should help you and your students get the most out of attending *Our Class*:

- **Please arrive early.** When travelling in the city, whether by school bus or TTC, it is always best to leave extra time in case of traffic or transit delays. All Wednesday matinee performances will begin promptly at 1:30PM. To avoid disruption, **LATECOMERS** will be seated at the discretion of the front of house staff, during an appropriate break in the action.

- Depending upon where you are coming from, your students may not be familiar with downtown Toronto and the experience of being in the city may be exciting and even overwhelming or distracting for some. We ask that you kindly advise your students to remain at the theatre during intermission. If possible, you may want to consider allowing time prior to the performance for students to explore the area. The Berkeley Street Theatre is located near Toronto's unique Distillery District and is a 10-minute walk to the St. Lawrence Market.

- Food and beverages are not permitted in the auditorium and all photography and recording of the performance are strictly prohibited. Please impress upon your students the importance of turning off all cell phones, iPods and other electronic devices. **Remind students that they will be seeing people performing live** and, as a rule, if you can see and hear the actors, the actors can see and hear you. Even text messaging – with its distracting, glowing blue light – is **extremely disruptive** in the theatre. **Please be courteous**.

- **CONTENT WARNING:** Our Class contains some very strong language and challenging and mature subject matter including descriptions of physical and sexual violence. If you have concerns about content or language prior to attending the performance and wish to receive further details please do not hesitate to contact Bridget at outreach@studio180theatre.com or 416-962-1800.

- We encourage student responses and feedback. Please take the time to discuss appropriate audience responses with your students. After each Wednesday matinee and Thursday evening performance, we offer a talkback (Q&A) session because we are interested in hearing what our audiences have to say, and we hope to answer questions and respond to concerns. It may be helpful for students to think of some questions prior to attending the performance. As well, if students are aware of the post-show talkback they will be better prepared to formulate questions during the performance. Following the performance, kindly take a moment to complete **Section B. Teacher Response Form**. Your feedback is valuable to us.

E. Topics for Discussion and Classroom Activities

1. Theatrical Presentation

a. ISSUE-BASED THEATRE

Studio 180 is unique in that it produces plays that speak to socially and politically relevant issues. With your class, examine the company's Vision and Mission statements.

Studio 180's Vision
The experience of live performance inspires people to engage more fully in the world

Studio 180's Mission
To produce socially relevant theatre that provokes public discourse and promotes community engagement

i. What do these statements mean to you? Does Studio 180's Vision resonate and have meaning? How effectively do you think the company's Mission serves its Vision? How does this production of *Our Class* work toward fulfilling the Mission?

ii. Why live theatre? What makes theatre an effective art form through which to explore social and political issues? The story of the massacre in Jedwabne has been well told by the documentary film *Where is my Older Brother Cain*, and the book *Neighbors*. What is unique about live theatre? Consider what is specific about your intellectual, emotional and communal responses to attending live theatre, compared to engaging in other forms of art, communication and media.

Hint: *How does live theatre HUMANIZE issues and why is the humanization of social and political issues important?*

iii. Brainstorm issues that you would like to see turned into a piece of theatre. If you were going to see another play, or write a play yourself, what would you want it to be about? This question may serve as a jumping off point for **drama students** to begin their own issue-based theatre projects around stories and topics of particular relevance to them.

b. POINTS OF VIEW

One way we hope theatre will be an effective tool to explore important issues is through the portrayal of multiple perspectives or points of view.

How effective is *Our Class* in exploring different sides of a story? Was the play even-handed? Did you feel that a multitude of opinions and points of view were expressed? Were the characters portrayed fairly? Which characters and stories were the most memorable? Which voices remained with you longest and why? Which moments had the greatest impact? Which characters surprised you? Did the play create questions for you regarding the characters or their circumstances? Did you form an emotional attachment to any of the characters? Who did you want to see more of? Did you disagree with what some of the characters were saying? What would you ask those characters, given the opportunity?

c. DIRECT ADDRESS

Most of *Our Class* is performed in a **"direct address"** style whereby characters speak directly to the audience.

Why do you think the playwright chose to write in a direct address style? How does your experience as an audience member differ watching this type of theatre, compared to a more traditional "fourth wall" drama whereby the characters demonstrate no awareness of the audience? Do you listen differently? Do the words have a different impact? Do you have a different emotional reaction? Are you affected physically? Do you prefer watching one style over the other? Why?

d. DESIGN

How did the design of the production affect the presentation of the piece? How effective was the set in defining the space? What mood or ambience was created? How did colour, texture and space add to the theatrical experience? How was lighting used to create mood or ambience? How did lighting work to define space and setting? How did the set and the lights work in combination with one another? How was sound and music used to affect the presentation? How were costumes used to define characters? How did the costume designer make use of colour, texture and style?

How were the set, costumes, lighting, sound and props used to evoke the many different places and time periods in which the story was set? Was the design **naturalistic** (a literal and accurate representation) or **abstract** (meant to evoke time and place)? **Drama students** should discuss the difference between the two approaches to design, focusing on the techniques used in this particular production.

e. "ART IS THE LIE THAT TELLS THE TRUTH" – Pablo Picasso

Discuss the meaning of this quotation and how it pertains to a play like *Our Class.*

What does it mean for a piece of art to be "based on a true story"? Is Tadeusz Slobodzianek's portrayal of the Jedwabne massacre and its legacy **true**? What is the relationship between reality and truth? How does Slobodzianek us his imagination to uncover truth in this play?

The **truth** of what happened in Jedwabne remains a controversial issue. How does the play emphasize the complex nature of **truth** and the importance of critically examining many sides of a story?

Toward the end of the play, two characters – Heniek and Wladek – engage in an argument over the nature of **truth**. After seeing the play, use this excerpt of text to jumpstart a class discussion about the nature of truth in *Our Class* and the ways in which live theatre can help us uncover universal human truths.

Wladek:	**I'm telling the truth Heniek.**
Heniek:	**Oh yes? And what precisely is that Wladek? You think you know? People can twist the truth in any way they like. Have you thought about that?**

2. "What Could I Do?": Personal and Collective Responsibility

a. "WHAT COULD I DO?"

This question, or a version of it, is asked repeatedly throughout the course of the play, uttered by almost every character. By asking this defensive question, the speaker abdicates responsibility and attempts to rid him or herself of blame and assuage his or her feelings of guilt.

After watching *Our Class* consider the various circumstances in which characters throw up their hands and ask if there was an alternative course of action they could possibly have taken. In some cases the stakes are relatively low and in some cases the stakes are matters of life and death. With your class, explore the reasons why characters may have acted the way they did and discuss what other choices they could have made. What would *you* have done under similar circumstances?

Select some of the following moments from the play to us as jumping off points for your class discussion. Consider how each circumstance deals with the issue of taking responsibility for one's actions. What is the impact of hearing the phrase, "What could I do?" repeated over and over again by different characters? How is Dora's situation similar to that of Rysiek? How do Wladek's words echo those of Zygmunt? How do Abram's circumstances compare to the others?

i. Early in the play, the children find a love note that Rysiek has written to Dora and they all make fun of him. **Dora** says: **"I felt bad for him, but what could I do?"**

ii. When the NKVD agents come to Jakub's house in the night, drag him out of bed, take him into the forest and ask him to identify Rysiek, **Jakub** complies: **"The men went inside and dragged out Rysiek. They said to me… do you know this man? Yes, I said, it's Rysiek. What could I do?"**

iii. Rysiek doesn't know who turned him in to the NKVD. In the play, **Zygmunt** tells us: **"What choice did I have? I had to sacrifice someone. And Rysiek was tough. Heniek would have folded in minutes… And Wladek?... don't even ask…"**

iv. When the Jews of Jedwabne are being beaten, tortured and humiliated in the main square, Zocha is present. Dora sees her, tells her how she has been raped and tortured and begs her for a drink of water and asks if she'll take baby Igorek to safety. **Zocha** walks away and asks us, **"What was I supposed to do?"**

v. Soon after, **Rysiek** also witnesses his classmate Dora being tortured and humiliated. He says, **"I did feel bad for her. She looked really pretty. But what could I do? Everyone was watching."**

vi. Later in the play, Wladek saves Marianna's life after Rysiek is about to kill her. When Wladek shoots and kills Rysiek Marianna asks, "Wladek what have you done?" to which **Wladek** responds, **"What else could I do? Let us be slaughtered like those Jews of yours?"**

vii. Menachem finds safety by hiding at Zocha's. When Zygmunt suspects that Zocha is hiding Menachem he is angry and he beats and rapes Zocha who protects

Menachem, refusing to give him up. **Menachem** confesses, **"I could hear everything. What could I do?"**

viii. Toward the end of the play **Abram** speaks to the issue of collective responsibility pertaining to North American Jewry during the war when he says to Zocha, **"That Jewish couple took you in and showed you kindness and this is how you repay them? What could they have done during the war? What could any of us have done?"**

b) WHAT WOULD *YOU* DO?

Take the conversation one step further and ask students to come up with situations in their own lives when they felt helpless, unable or unwilling to act. Can students come up with circumstances in which, given the chance, they would go back and take another course of action?

Use your imagination and do some role-playing to further explore real or fictional circumstances. Draw from the personal experiences offered by students or create imagined circumstances in which someone has the opportunity to step in and take responsibility. Here are some examples of circumstances to use for your improvisational explorations:

i. A student you barely know is being bullied in the hall at school. How does the situation change if it is your best friend who is being bullied? What if the bully is a stranger from another school? Improvise variations on these situations and discuss the outcomes.

ii. You work part-time at a clothing store three times a week. You notice one of your co-workers is being unfairly targeted and picked on by one of your supervisors.

iii. You and your friends are getting ready to leave a party but one friend insists on staying behind. You know she has had a lot to drink and that she doesn't know anyone else at the party. What do you do?

c) OVERWHELMING RESPONSIBILITY

In *Our Class*, during the Jedwabne massacre, Wladek hides Rachelka to keep her safe and informs her of what is happening to the Jews of the town, including her entire family. She says, "Wladek you have to help them. I'm begging you." Wladek responds:

"All right. I'll see what I can do. I'll try. But I didn't even try. Because how could I save them all?"

In the face of such overwhelming responsibility, is it easy to feel paralyzed? Is it easier to do nothing? Why do you think so few people helped the Jews of Jedwabne? Why do you think the entire world stood by as 6,000,000 Jews were massacred during the Holocaust?

Can you think of contemporary examples of overwhelming circumstances (eg. Global Warming, Haiti, Darfur)? What if we can only do a little to help? Is it worth it, in the face of such huge, daunting problems? Is it worth it to recycle? Is it worth it to make a $20 donation to relief in Haiti? Why or why not?

3. Us v. Them and Identifying "The Other"

a. UNDERSTANDING PREJUDICE

Our Class dramatizes how friends and neighbours can turn against one another and even be driven to acts of extreme violence including genocide. While repeated historical examples teach us that human beings are capable of such atrocities (The Holocaust, Rwanda, the Balkans), it can be difficult to wrap our heads around how such hatred can develop and how communities can be so bitterly divided. Prior to launching into a show-specific discussion about anti-Semitism (**the intense dislike for and prejudice against Jewish people**) in *Our Class*, it might be useful to lead your class through a broader discussion of prejudice and anti-Semitism. Be sure to keep in mind the guidelines set out in **Section A. Notes for Teachers**.

Prior to engaging in this discussion you will find it helpful for you and your students to read the articles provided by Section F. Background Information. Two articles: ***An Abridged History of Anti-Semitism*** and ***The Holocaust*** are included in this Study Guide, courtesy of the Anti-Defamation League. Together they provide an excellent background for students attending *Our Class* and offer a foundation upon which to discuss the issues and themes of the play.

FURTHER STUDY: Your discussion need not be limited to anti-Semitism in the play *Our Class*. We believe that theatre can provide a springboard to class discussion of topics that resonate for students in their daily lives. Your class may be interested in talking about forms of prejudice and discrimination they witness and experience in their own lives, including racism, religious intolerance, ageism, sexism, homophobia, class discrimination and others.

b. STEREOTYPES

One of the ways in which prejudices are perpetuated in our society is through the use of stereotypes. When we stereotype someone we apply a generalized assumption we have about a group to an individual. These assumptions may be based on things we've learned from our family or peers or from the various media sources that surround us. They are not based on fact and they do not take into account a person's individuality. When we discount someone's individuality we begin to strip them of their humanity.

Stereotypes are not always based on *negative* generalizations (e.g., Jewish people are cheap, Black people are lazy, Asian people are poor drivers). Sometimes a generalization about a group of people can, on the surface, appear to be positive (e.g., Jewish people are rich, Black people are great athletes, Asian people are smart).

It shouldn't be difficult to determine how ascribing a trait such as "laziness" to an entire group of people is harmful and wrong. But what are the dangers of assuming that every member of a certain group shares a positive attribute such as intelligence, financial wealth or athletic prowess?

Drawing upon the Anti-Defamation League articles and your experience at *Our Class*, can you identify Jewish stereotypes? How are these harmful and damaging? How have Jewish myths and stereotypes historically contributed to discrimination, persecution and genocide?

Bring the discussion closer to home by identifying stereotypes prevalent in your community, in the media and at your school. Have you ever felt like you were stereotyped? Can you identify a time when you stereotyped someone else? How does it feel to be stereotyped and what are the individual and societal consequences of stereotyping?

c. GHETTOIZATION AND "THE OTHER"

A ghetto is a part of a city occupied by a specific (often religious racial, or ethnic) minority group. The first official ghettos were created in Europe as places in which to isolate Jews from the rest of the population. In these instances, Jews were forcibly relocated to ghettos and required by law to live there. One of the most famous such ghettos was the Warsaw Ghetto – established in Poland in 1940.

In a contemporary North American context a ghetto most commonly refers to a section of a city occupied by a specific ethnic, racial or religious minority – often Black or African American – and characterized by extreme poverty and high crime rates.

Ghettoization is the process by which groups of people are isolated and forced out of the mainstream either physically or culturally.

With your class discuss the origins of the term "ghetto" and contrast these to contemporary colloquial uses of the word. For example, does anyone ever use the casual expression, "That's so ghetto"? When would you use that expression? When we consider the root of this expression, what are the deeper implications of using this phrase?

FURTHER STUDY: Read the following excerpt of the essay "The Evil Shadow of the Wall" by Polish writer Halina Bortnowska published in *Gazeta Wyborcza* in 2003 and republished by Jan T. Gross in his 2006 book *Fear*. What does Bortnowska point out about the process of ghettoization and thinking of our fellow human beings as "the other"? Discuss ways in which we ghettoize people and issues in our own lives and communities. In what ways do we distance ourselves from people and think of them as "the other"? What effect does this have on us and on our communities?

I remember two things, not from books or recounted stories, but the way one remembers a recurring bad dream. Spring, sunlight, April clouds; dark, imposing, and swirling black snow is falling, flakes of soot. "It's from the ghetto," says my mother, wiping this black snow from the windowsill, from the face, from the eyes. Of course one could hear during the day, and especially at night, explosions and distant shooting. It was not very unusual in Warsaw at that time, but it always brought fear. "It's nothing. It's in the ghetto."

"In the ghetto" then meant – not here; not where we are; this fire will not come here; it will not engulf my street, my courtyard… Does anybody but me still remember that we used to say – "It's nothing, it's in the ghetto"? We sued to say it to each other just like that, in a tone of comforting explanation, as soldiers must reassure each other that a particular alarm is for somebody else.

But today I am ashamed of this distance. I see in it the evil shadow of the wall cast over one's soul. It is as if the perpetrators of Warsaw's Holocaust managed to remove the Jews from the realm of human solidarity; and as if they managed to remove us beyond the range where we could experience it. What did I feel when the black snow was falling? Nothing. Nothing, really?

F. Background Information

The following articles are generously provided by the Anti-Defamation League and are intended to help you prepare your students for attending Studio 180's production of *Our Class* and to assist in your follow-up classroom discussion.

1. An Abridged History of Anti-Semitism

Definition

Anti-Semitism is the hatred of the Jewish people and/or Judaism, the Jewish religion. It has been called anti-Judaism when it targets Jewish beliefs and practices, and anti-Semitism when it targets the Jewish people as a perceived race. Sometimes referred to as "the oldest hatred," it began as a conflict over religious beliefs, but in certain places and times, it evolved into a governmental policy of political, economic and social isolation, exclusion, degradation, and attempted annihilation. It did not begin in the Nazi era, nor did it end with the close of World War II. Its continuance over the millennia speaks to the power of scapegoating a group that is defined as "the other."

Biblical Times

Abraham who is believed to be the father of the three monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) led his family to Canaan almost 2,000 years before the Common Era (B.C.E.). It was there that a new nation – the people of Israel – came into being. During those centuries before Christ, the Hebrews (the early Jewish people) experienced occasional persecution because they refused to worship the idols of the kingdoms in the Middle East. This was seen as stubborn and was resented by surrounding nations since the usual custom of the times was to adopt the religion of the locale or ruler.

Anti-Judaism

After the beginning of Christianity, a new anti-Judaism evolved. Initially, Christianity was seen as simply another Jewish sect since Jesus and his Disciples were Jewish and were preaching a form of Judaism. In the year 70 C.E. (Common Era), the Romans destroyed the Jewish State and most Jews were scattered throughout the ancient world.

During the first few hundred years after the crucifixion of Jesus, by the Romans, followers of both Judaism and Christianity, lived together throughout the Mediterranean sometimes peacefully, sometimes with hostility, as both groups tried to spread their religious beliefs in the same lands.

When the Roman Emperors converted to Christianity, it became the sole established religion of the Roman Empire. Since both religions followed the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament), early Christian church leaders sought to establish their religion as a successor to Judaism by asserting that Jesus was the Messiah to those who refused to become Christians.

The unwillingness to accept Jesus as the Messiah was viewed as a threat to the Roman rulers and the Christian faith. By not recognizing Jesus, Jews were seen as abandoning their role in the divine plan and were thus seen as unnecessary. A destructive charge was now imposed upon the Jews; they were portrayed as "Christ Killers."

The Middle Ages: The Early Modern Period

During the next three centuries (300–600 C.E.) new patterns of institutionalized discrimination against Jews occurred: Jews were forbidden to intermarry with Christians (399 C.E.), prohibited from holding high positions in government (439 C.E.), and prevented from appearing as witnesses against Christians in court (531 C.E.). As Jews were officially being excluded, certain bizarre fantasies about Jews arose in Northern Europe that foreshadowed the anti-Semitism of the 20th Century. Some people came to believe that Jews had horns and tails or engaged in ritual murder of Christians. The latter allegation, referred to as "blood libel," was created by Thomas of Monmouth, an Englishman, in 1150 to explain the mysterious death of a Christian boy. The belief appears again in English and German myths. In addition, Jews were accused of poisoning wells in various communities.

In 1095, Pope Urban II made a general appeal to the Christians of Europe to take up the cross and sword and liberate the Holy Land from the Muslims, beginning what was to be known as the Crusades. The religious fervour that drove men, and later even children, on the Crusades was to have direct consequences for Jews. The Crusader army on the way to attacking Muslims in the Holy Land swept through Jewish communities looting, raping and massacring Jews. This was the beginning of the pogrom, or the organized massacre of helpless people, who held unpopular religious beliefs.

During the middle of the 14th century the Bubonic Plague spread throughout Europe, killing an estimated one-third of the population. Fear, superstition and ignorance prompted the need to find someone to blame and the Jews were a convenient scapegoat because of the myths and stereotypes that already existed about them. Though Jews were also dying from the plague, they were accused of poisoning wells and spreading the disease.

Martin Luther, the founder of the 16th Century Reformation and Protestantism, wrote a pamphlet in 1545 entitled The Jews and Their Lies. Luther claimed that Jews thirsted for Christian blood and urged that the Jews be killed. The Nazis reprinted this pamphlet in 1935. Some scholars feel that these outrageous attacks mark the transition from anti-Judaism (attacks motivated because of the Jews' refusal to accept Christianity) to anti-Semitism (hatred of Jews as a so-called "race" who would contaminate the purity of another race.)

Increasingly Jews were subjected to political, economic and social discrimination, resulting in the loss of their legal and civil rights. In some European countries, they were segregated by laws which forced them to live in certain sections of the towns called ghettos. Beginning in the 13th Century, in many parts of Europe, Jews were required to wear a distinctive emblem (a badge and/or a pointed hat) so that they could be immediately recognized.

Jews were forbidden to own land, and in agricultural societies there were few other means of supporting their families. Since the Church did not allow Christians to loan money for profit, money lending became one of the few ways in which Jews could earn money legally. Once they became associated with the forbidden trade of usury (loaning money for interest) a new set of stereotypes evolved in which Jews were accused of being money hungry.

As moneylenders, Jews were frequently useful to rulers who used their capital to build

cathedrals and outfit armies. As long as Jews benefited the ruler, either through finance or by serving as a convenient scapegoat, they were tolerated. When they were no longer of use to the ruler, Jews were expelled – from England in 1290, France in 1394, and Spain in 1492.

The Enlightenment
During the 18th Century, Europe was influenced by the increase in knowledge of the scientific world and a new perception of the human condition. The idea of universal human progress led to a belief in the basic equality of all individuals. Following the spread of Enlightenment ideas throughout Europe during Napoleon's conquests, many countries in Europe granted Jews citizenship rights.

In Germany, Jews were granted full civil rights in 1871 after the German states unified into a single nation called the Second Reich. With their new status as full citizens, Jews were able to take up many occupations previously denied to them. Many Jews improved their social and economic positions by becoming storekeepers, lawyers, doctors, and teachers. However, full professorships in the universities and high military ranks were rarely available to them. Many left the ghettos and became part of German's growing middle class. With citizenship, many Jews came to believe that their first loyalty was to their nation. They fought as German soldiers in the Franco-Prussian War and in World War I.

Jews made important contributions in many aspects of German culture. They participated actively in the visual arts, theater, film, the scientific community, literature, philosophy, medicine, law, etc. German Jews such as Albert Einstein, Martin Buber, Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Kurt Weill, Walter Rathenau, Heinrich Heine, Hannah Arendt and Ernest Lubitsch and many others made significant contributions in their respective fields.

Anti-Semitism
The term anti-Semitism was first used in 1873 by Wilhelm Marr, a German politician. It coincided with the development across Northern Europe and the United States of a new so-called pseudo-science based on theories of racial superiority and inferiority. These ideas were also used to justify European colonialism during the 19th century.

It has sometimes been stated that the term "anti-Semitism" should or does include all Semitic people and not just Jews. As the term was created specifically to refer to hatred of Jews, this is historically and linguistically false and in some cases, it is an attempt to co-op the terminology to use against Jews today.

Many have asked why anti-Semitism turned to genocide in Germany, rather than in France or England, which had the same medieval heritage. Following World War I, Germany was a deeply troubled country. Having lost the war, its citizens felt humiliated by the defeat. The victorious countries, including the United States, France and England authored the Treaty of Versailles, a peace treaty which compelled Germany to give up territory, and to pay large sums of money to the countries whose territories it had damaged during the war. Germany also suffered severe economic problems of inflation and unemployment during the 1920s and 1930s. The government of the Weimer Republic which was established after World War I was unable to solve these problems. Increasingly, there were strikes and riots that the government could not control.

In 1933 when the Nazi Party, under the leadership of Adolph Hitler seized control over Germany, Hitler could call upon remembered myths of the "blood libel" to evoke fear that the Jews would contaminate what he referred to as the superior "Aryan race." A significant number of the German people had "bought into" the extremely effective use of Nazi propaganda and were willing to place blame for Germany's problems on the Jews. Therefore, according to Hitler's doctrine, all Jews, and their genetic pool had to be eliminated.

The Holocaust
There may be no more succinct description of the Holocaust than the statement issued by the Vatican on March 12, 1998:

> This century has witnessed an unspeakable tragedy, which can never be forgotten: the attempt by the Nazi regime to exterminate the Jewish people, with the consequent killing of millions of Jews. Women and men, old and young, children and infants, for the sole reason of their Jewish origin, were persecuted and deported. Some were killed immediately, while others were degraded, ill-treated, tortured and utterly robbed of their human dignity, and then murdered. Very few of those who entered the [Concentration] Camps survived, and those who did remained scarred for life. This was the Shoah.

As Pope John Paul II recognized, "erroneous (mistaken) and unjust interpretations of the New Testament regarding the Jewish people and their alleged culpability (guilt) have circulated for too long…." and may have created anti-Jewish sentiment in some Christian minds and hearts. The progressive dehumanization that Jews endured – the image of the Jews' demonic "otherness" – made the Holocaust possible.

Contemporary Anti-Semitism
Contemporary anti-Semitism draws upon all the old forms and images. In various parts of the world, there exists a disturbing coexistence of anti-Judaism (the theological hatred of Jews and Judaism), anti-Semitism (hatred of Jews as a race or group), state sponsored anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism (opposition to the establishment or development of the State of Israel) and various forms of these strains.

While anti-Zionism is not always anti-Semitic, often it is. When one country is singled out for criticism and reproach when other countries are engaged in similar or more problematic acts and are not criticized, it is reflective of a double standard and prejudicial attitudes. The line is crossed when it passes from criticism of the actions or policies of the government (which is legitimate) to questioning the very existence of the Jewish state (which is a form of bigotry and anti-Semitism).

A defining characteristic of anti-Semitism today is the concept of "Jewish power." This is unique as most groups who are the subject of such intense hatred are hated for their perceived inferiority while hatred for Jews seems to target their perceived power and the control (often invisible) that such power gives Jews over others.

The stereotype of Jewish power is derived from The Protocols of the Elders of Zion. This document, supposedly the writings of a secret group of rabbis plotting to take over the world, was later found to be forged by the secret police of Czar Nicholas II in an attempt to blame the Jews for problems Russia was experiencing. The "Protocols" were to serve as one of the bulwarks of Nazi propaganda and were introduced into the curriculum of

many of Germany's schools.

While the "Protocols" have been delegitimized throughout most of the West, they have recently taken on a new currency in the Middle East. In Fall 2002, the Egyptian state-owned media released a 41-part television series, "Horseman Without a Horse," based on the "Protocols." Indeed, there appears to be a recent and widespread adoption of medieval European libels of Jews throughout parts of the Islamic world. Most chilling has been the credence in many parts of Europe to the attempt by many in the Muslim world to blame Jews or Israel for responsibility for the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center.

A recent ADL survey of five European countries finds that one in five people hold strong anti-Semitic sentiments (September 2002). In Germany today, governmental safeguards against fascist anti-Semitism have been instituted and yet young neo-Nazi Skinheads, frustrated at rising unemployment, look for scapegoats. When they cannot find living Jews, they desecrate Jewish cemeteries and look for other vulnerable targets such as immigrant workers. In Eastern Europe, the collapse of the Soviet Union has brought with it a rise in nationalist groups that use anti-Semitism to meet their political ends. There is even anti-Semitism in countries where there are virtually no Jews, like Japan.

The United States has been unique in its constitutional separation of church and state, full provision for citizenship for Jews and its institutional support of Jewish life from President Washington to the present. Despite these institutional protections, Jews still experience enjoying the full benefits of citizenship, according to the 2001 FBI Hate Crimes Statistics Act Report, 75 percent of hate crime incidents motivated by religious bias targeted Jews. In addition, extremist groups and Skinhead youth promote racist and anti-Semitic worldviews and are actively recruiting young people through various means including on the Internet. Anti-Semitism has a history and, like all forms of hate, it has a legacy as well.

2. The Holocaust

The Holocaust was the systematic persecution and annihilation of more than 6 million Jews as a central act of state by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. Although millions of others, such as Romani, Sinti, homosexuals, the disabled and political opponents of the Nazi regime, were also victims of persecution and murder, only the Jews were singled out for total extermination.

Under the leadership of Adolf Hitler, this brutal campaign began with a deliberate series of progressively hostile acts of bigotry, repression, humiliation and discrimination. Authorized by the Nazis and their collaborators, such actions were based on the views that the German (or "Aryan") people were a superior "race," that all non-Germans were therefore inferior, and that Jews were race-poisoners. The intervals between each phase – from antilocution (using hostile, bigoted language) to avoidance to discrimination to violence to genocide – were frighteningly small.

Jewish victims of the Holocaust were rounded up from all parts of Nazi-occupied Europe and shipped to concentration camps where almost all were shot, hanged, subjected to hideous medical experiments, gassed or worked to death. Only a small percentage survived. It did not matter whether they were rich or poor, religious or secular, or decorated soldiers of the First World War. If they had even one Jewish grandparent (a provision of the Nuremberg Laws), they were marked for destruction.

Any act of resistance against this juggernaut demanded enormous courage. Those who helped or rescued Jews did so at great risk to their own lives and those of their families. While most people remained silent or excused their complicity on the grounds that they were only following orders, a few remarkable people, known today as the Righteous Among Nations, took the risks and hid or rescued Jews. Contrary to the bestiality of the Nazis and the indifference of most people in Germany and in the Nazi-occupied nations, these individuals represent the finest and noblest of the human spirit.

When the Nazi regime collapsed in 1945 under the onslaught of the Allied nations and the world learned the full extent to which the hatred of Jews had been carried, the few Jewish survivors faced living without homes, possessions, families and communities. Many left Europe – the continent soaked with the blood of their fellow Jews – and tried to rebuild their shattered lives in the United States, in Israel and elsewhere. The Nazi dream of a "master race" came to an end at the War Crimes Trials held at Nuremberg in 1945. The United States, England, France and the Soviet Union joined forces to stand in judgment of the Nazi crimes against humanity.

G. Timeline of Events

1917 The Russian Revolution brings an end to the Tsarist regime, paving the way for Communism and the creation of the Soviet Union under Chairman Vladimir Lenin.

1918 WWI ends and Poland becomes an independent nation under the leadership of Józef Piłsudski.

1919 Free state primary school becomes compulsory in Poland.

The Polish/Soviet War begins.

1920 Poland is victorious in the conflict with the Soviets.

1926 Piłsudski leads a military coup and appoints a new Prime Minister and President of Poland.

1928 Poland enjoys nearly 0% unemployment and wages for skilled labour increase.

1929 The Wall Street Crash results in The Great Depression.

1933 Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party ascend to power in Germany. Nazi ideology includes extreme and aggressive anti-Semitism and promotes the idea of a pure and superior Aryan race.

1935 Marshal Piłsudski dies and a new Polish Constitution is written, supporting militant Nationalism.

In Germany, Hitler introduces the Nuremberg Laws: institutionalized anti-Semitism through oppressive prohibitions against Jews.

1936 Throughout Poland anti-Semitism deepens. The Church preaches the image of Jews as Christ-killers and such stereotypes are widely accepted. The Church preaches the self-sufficiency of Poles and supports the boycott of Jewish businesses. The Polish Prime Minister even sanctions sporadic attacks on Jewish property. In September, the Polish National Party distributes anti-Semitic propaganda throughout Jedwabne.

1937 **August** Nationalist youths holding metal bars stand outside Jewish shops to prevent Poles from shopping.

September The Minister of Education orders the separation of Jewish children during school prayer.

1939 **August** Stalin and Hitler sign The Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact – a Treaty of Non-Aggression that divides Poland between Germany and the Soviet Union and effectively sets in motion the actions that result in WWII.

September The Germans and Soviets invade and occupy Poland with the

Soviets occupying the part of the country that includes Jedwabne.

The Polish Liberation Army – an underground resistance group develops.

The NKVD establishes an office in Jedwabne and arrests anyone who resists the Soviets.

1940 Soviet rule of Poland is extremely repressive, characterized by mass arrests and deportations of Polish elites. There are food shortages and people must stand in long lines for everything. Anti-Soviet sentiment is brutally repressed, private property is seized by the state and a secularization campaign seeks to eliminate religion and its institutions.

In May and April approximately 22,000 Polish nationals are murdered by the Soviets during The Katyn Massacre.

In October the Warsaw ghetto is created.

1941 **June** Hitler invades Soviet Poland and the Nazis liberate Jedwabne from Soviet rule, taking over the town NKVD office.

July 10 The Jedwabne massacre in which over 1,500 Jews are murdered (amounting to approximately 50% of the town's population). Many are burned alive in a barn. Approximately 12 Jedwabne Jews survive.

Law and order in Poland under the Nazis quickly deteriorates and the underground resistance movement strengthens, using guerilla tactics to attempt to weaken the Nazi occupiers.

1942 The Polish Worker Party and the Home Army are created. Jewish ghettoes in occupied Poland are liquidated as Hitler carries out his plan of complete eradication of the Jews.

1944 The Warsaw Uprising

Defeat of the Nazis at Stalingrad and the Soviet Army advances through Poland to Germany.

1945 On May 7th, Germany surrenders.

In Poland, a Communist-led provisional government is established and signs a treaty of friendship with the Soviet Union. New borders are established.

1946 Anti-Jewish pogrom in Kielce, Poland.

Germans are deported from Poland.

Industrial enterprises are nationalized.

1947 Communist victory in rigged elections and all opposition parties are eliminated.

1948 State of Israel is established

A Stalinist regime is introduced in Poland.

1949 There is a two-week investigation into the Jedwabne massacre. 15 men are arrested and tried for the crimes. The massacre is officially attributed to the Nazis.

1953 Joseph Stalin dies.

1956 Polish President Beirut dies and President Gomulka comes to power, ushering in a period of increased Polish independence. The Church begins to flourish and industry rebuilds. Stalinism is over in Poland, but there are no noticeable improvements to the living standards of ordinary citizens.

1967 Six Day War between Israel and a coalition of neighbouring Arab states. Israel prevails and gains territory.

1968 Student demonstrations at Warsaw University break out when the government bans a performance of a play at Warsaw's Polish Theatre – Dziady by Adam Mickiewicz – on the grounds that it contains anti-Soviet references.

Deportation of Jewish intelligentsia from Poland.

1969 Major revival of widespread anti-Semitism throughout Poland.

1970 Food prices rise sharply and workers' strikes surge.

1971 Polish citizens enjoy a marked improvement of living standards, largely due to substantial borrowing from the West.

1973 Yom Kippur War between Israel and neighbouring Arab states.

1976 Sharp price increases in Poland once again result in a resurgence of workers' strikes.

1978 The Bishop of Krakow, Cardinal Karol Józef Wojtyła, is named Pope John Paul II.

1980 A wave of labour unrest and workers' strikes leads to the foundation of Solidarity: a labour union and civil rights movement opposing the governing Communist regime.

1981 Solidarity threatens a massive demonstration in Warsaw and the Communist government suppresses the movement by enacting Martial Law and arresting Solidarity leaders including founding member Lech Wałęsa.

1983 Martial Law ends in Poland and Wałęsa is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

1988 The Communist government in Poland enters into talks with the Solidarity opposition.

1989 Semi-free elections are held in Poland and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev consents for Poland to determine its own political future. Tadeusz Mazowiecki becomes the first non-Communist Prime Minister in the Soviet bloc.

1990 Poland's Communist President Wojciech Jaruzelski steps down.

1997 A new Polish Constitution is written.

2000 Polish film-maker Agnieszka Arnold produces the films Where Is My Older Brother Cain and Neighbors and Jan T. Gross publishes the book Neighbors, all indicating Polish responsibility for the Jedwabne massacre, previously attributed to the Nazis. The works are highly controversial and spark debate.

2001 Polish President Aleksander Kwaśniewski publicly apologizes for the Jedwabne massacre and a 60th anniversary commemoration ceremony is held and televised.

Poland's Institute of National Remembrance carries out an investigation and determines that Polish townspeople of Jedwabne were, in fact responsible for the massacre.

H. Glossary of Terms

Prior to attending *Our Class* it will be useful for your students to be familiar with the following words, people, places and concepts:

Ellis Island
Located at the southern tip of Manhattan, beside the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island became America's main point of entry for immigrants beginning in 1892. It was the gateway to the New World for millions of people during the first half of the 20th century, until it was shut down in 1954. It is now preserved as an immigration museum. In *Our Class*, Abram comes to Ellis Island and is representative of the millions of Europeans who crossed the ocean seeking a better life.

Joseph Stalin
The infamous Communist Dictator was the leader of the Soviet Union from 1924 until his death in 1953. In 1939, he signed a non-aggression pact with Hitler and invaded and occupied part of Poland that included the town of Jedwabne. In *Our Class* we witness Polish responses to the Soviet Communist occupation, which was notable for being brutally repressive, resulting in the extermination of millions of people.

Adolph Hitler
The man whose name has become synonymous with "evil", Hitler and his Nazi Party rose to power in Germany in 1933, striving to conquer the world for their "pure" and "superior" Aryan race. Critical to the oppressive Fascist regime's ideology was their extreme brand of anti-Semitism and their goal of total annihilation of the Jewish people. This attempted genocide, referred to as "The Holocaust," resulted in the systematic murders of 6,000,000 Jews, nearly eradicating the Jewish population of Europe.

"Commie-Jew Conspiracy"
One of the most pervasive Jewish stereotypes of the 20th century, this label refers to the widespread accusation that all Jews are Communists. The Nazis exploited this stereotype to fuel anti-Semitic sentiments and the belief was prevalent in places like Poland (as demonstrated in *Our Class*). This false belief was not limited to Europe and has also prevailed throughout North America and even persists among some people today.

NKVD
Under Stalin, The People's Ministry of Internal Affairs was the Soviet Union's security force, responsible for both civic policing and state security. NKVD agents were also responsible for a reign of terror over the Soviet people and anyone in Soviet occupied territories, characterized by carrying out widespread repression, mass deportations and executions.

Gendarmerie
A military police force charged with civil policing.

pogrom
Originally used to describe anti-Jewish attacks in Russia, a pogrom is a violent attack on a group of people (mainly a religious or ethnic minority such as Jews), involving murder, looting and the destruction of property, often resulting in the partial or complete

eradication of a community. The Jedwabne massacre is an extreme but not isolated example.

Immanuel Kant
A German philosopher of the 18th century, studied in school by the children in *Our Class*.

Archimedes
An Ancient Greek mathematician, physicist, engineer, inventor and astronomer, studied in school by the children in *Our Class*.

kibbutz
A communal living model practiced in Israel. In *Our Class*, Menachem lives on a kibbutz when he immigrates to Israel.

Partisans
During WWII organized resistance groups emerged throughout Europe as people oppressed by the Nazis fought for freedom and survival.

United Polish Labour Party
The Communist political party governed Poland from the end of WWII until the collapse of European Communism in 1989.

Righteous Among Nations
This is the honour given to people who helped save Jewish lives during the Holocaust. While the majority of Europeans stood by amidst a mass genocide, some individuals were distinguished by their courage and compassion as they literally risked their lives and the lives of their families in order to help their Jewish neighbours. Many known as the Righteous were granted this distinction because they hid Jews in their homes and on their property. In *Our Class*, Zocha is awarded this honour because she saves Menachem.

Yom Kippur War
Also known as the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, this significant Middle East conflict was instigated by an attack on Israel by neighbouring Egypt and Syria together with a coalition of other Arab states, on October 6, 1973. It is often referred to as the "Yom Kippur War" (as it is in Our Class) because the initial attack was launched on Yom Kippur – the Jewish Day of Atonement and the holiest day of the Jewish calendar.

Solidarity Movement
In 1980, a wave of labour unrest and strikes gained momentum across Poland. A national trade union emerged in opposition to the governing Communist Party, and quickly amassed nation-wide support.

I. Topics For Further Study

Our Class covers nearly a century of European history and touches on many historical and contemporary issues. Prior to seeing the play or after attending the production, students may wish to research some of the issues and topics addressed in the piece. The following is a list of suggested research topics:

The Holocaust: While *Our Class* is not specifically a Holocaust play, the key incident of the play, the Jedwabne massacre, is related to the more widespread genocide that was occurring during WWII. The audience's appreciation of the play will be enhanced by an understanding of the Holocaust.

Immigration: In the play Abram immigrates to the United States from Poland. Topics for research may include patterns of historical waves of immigration in the early 20th century, the history of Ellis Island and contemporary Canadian immigration trends and policies.

North America During the Holocaust: In the play, Zocha asks: **"And what did Americans do to help Jews in the war?"** This question alerts us to an embarrassing period of North American history in which those in the West turned a blind eye to the plight of suffering Jews overseas. European Jews facing certain death had no way of escaping their fate as North American borders were firmly closed and desperate men, women and children were turned away. Students might be interested in uncovering this dark part of our collective past. What are Canada's contemporary policies with regard to refugees? Can you identify other examples of Canada turning away people in need?

Joseph Stalin and Soviet Communism: To better understand the plight of the people of Jedwabne under Soviet rule (as illustrated in the play), students will benefit from having a background understanding of this oppressive regime.

Adolph Hitler and Nazism: Crucial to understanding anti-Semitism in the 20th century and its repercussions, is a basic knowledge of Hitler and his plans to conquer Europe and eradicate the Jewish people.

Rape as a Weapon of War: All three women in the play are victims of unwanted sexual intercourse. Compare the circumstances of Zocha, Rachelka and Dora and discuss the ways in which they are sexually dominated by some of the men in the play. Of the three examples, Dora's circumstances are the most explicit and the most brutal when she is raped by multiple men during the Jedwabne massacre. In this case, Zygmunt and the other men are using rape as a weapon of war – something that occurs systematically during violent conflicts, genocides and ethnic cleansings. This topic is deserving of further research and exploration.

Torture: After identifying the many incidents of torture in *Our Class*, students may wish to research the ways in which torture is used as a weapon of war. What are some contemporary international guiding principles, conventions and laws with regard to the use of torture and what are some recent instances in which those have been violated?