

Dealing with Questions

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Docents and teachers are asked many questions. Usually, you will know how to respond. But what if you're caught off guard? These situations can be uncomfortable, but we want you to feel prepared and capable. Memorize the following steps for dealing with questions. See below for more specific examples of responses to select problematic questions. Please also keep in mind that these answers are always a work in progress and based off of current research and information.

1) Appreciate the question.

Thank the person for asking it, then tell them what an important or thoughtful question it is. Try to see their question as a sign of trust rather than a challenge or threat. You want to cultivate a safe space for learning and discussion by making them feel heard and not being dismissive.

2) Do not make up an answer to a question you do not know the answer to.

Always say, "I don't know" if you don't know the answer. Nobody knows all the answers. It takes courage to say, "I don't know," so challenge yourself to take the risk. Then, follow up by offering to help after the tour is over. Feel free to direct visitors to Amanda at OJMCHÉ if necessary.

3) Take a deep breath.

Maybe the answer doesn't come to mind immediately. Maybe they asked something problematic or upsetting. Take a deep breath and a moment to gather your thoughts. Even if you feel like like you are taking a while to respond, you are probably the only one who feels this way.

4) Answer using inclusive language that supports a variety of viewpoints.

Holocaust history, Jewish history, and our exhibits are all full of complexities and subtleties. Your answers should reflect this. Consider the following example:

Student: Do Jews believe in God?

Teacher/Docent: Just like everybody else, Jews believe many different things. Some Jews believe in God, and some Jews don't.

Don't know how to answer a question? It's as easy as 1-2-3!

- 1) That's a great question.
- 2) I don't know the answer.
- 3) Will you help me remember to look into it after the tour?

Select Tough Questions

What about the African slave trade/the murder of Native Americans/other genocides/what Israel is doing in Palestine? Isn't that just as bad as the Holocaust?

Why is it that any criticism of Israel is called antisemitism?

Why are we only talking about the Jews when there are other genocides?

That is a very important question, and a very important topic to learn more about. There are thousands of books and a lot of research out there on that topic, and I encourage you to visit your library to investigate it more. Even though it's a very important question, **this exhibition is not about comparing suffering, so we won't be doing that today.** This exhibition is about how life can be cut short because of hatred and intolerance. Let's try to keep that in mind as we continue.

Didn't the Jews kill Jesus? (Were the Jews being punished in the Holocaust?)

I don't have the expertise to say what might have happened during Jesus' lifetime, but I do know that historians, theologians, and scholars disagree about it. If you would like to see a bibliography on theological thought about the Holocaust, please see me after the tour. For now, we'll focus on this exhibit.

Why do people hate Jews?

Antisemitism is complex history. In his book, *Why?: Explaining the Holocaust*, historian Peter Hayes discusses longstanding overlapping layers of antisemitism. From religious differences to racial inferiority, negative stereotypes were spread about Jews and they became scapegoats for various circumstances.

Why did Nazis hate the Jews?

This is a complicated question without easy answers. Even before the Holocaust, a lot of people said and believed negative stereotypes about Jews, such as that they were responsible for the Black Plague or that they kidnapped Christian children. These myths made many people dislike Jews. The political and social climate in Germany before and during the Second World War was unstable and difficult, which is partly why Hitler was able to become so popular: people wanted a leader that seemed confident and powerful, and Hitler promised to restore stability and success for German citizens. Part of his policy was to reinforce negative stereotypes about Jews, such as that they were responsible for Germany losing the First World War.

At the same time, new scientific thought that classified living things was under development. German scientists use this racial science, also known as eugenics, to justify their classification of some people as inferior and others as superior ("Aryan," blond hair and blue eyes).

The Nazi party was violent. They imprisoned and murdered people who voiced their disagreement. Speaking or acting out against the Nazi party was a very high risk.

The Nazis and their collaborators (some of whom came from places other than Germany) murdered millions of people. Some of them were full of hate themselves; others were people who were too afraid to speak out or question things, even though they thought it was wrong.

It is also true that many Germans and others did not hate Jews at all. There were people, called partisans, in many countries, who tried to stop the Nazis. They carried out attacks on Nazi soldiers and tried to save civilians (including Jews). Other people helped hide and feed Jews during the war. Unfortunately, there weren't many partisans and helpers compared to the number of those who sympathized with Nazi ideology.

Trump/Hitler comparison

These are questions that some people are pondering right now. The fact that visitors feel they can make a comparison demonstrates how privileged we are to be able to criticize our government. However, we believe that outright comparisons with the Holocaust are dangerous and unproductive. We do recognize that we are in a perilous time in our country where certain rhetoric has led to violence. Rather than comparing, we believe we have a responsibility to sit and grapple with these ideas. To think about the power of words, ethical responsibility, legal implications, etc.

Why didn't the Jews convert?

It is common for visitors to try and find a way that more Jews could have survived. However, by posing the question this way, they place the onus on the victims to prevent or stop a situation that was out of their control. Help the visitor reframe the question to, "Why didn't the Nazi's allow Jews to convert?" Asking the question in this way places the responsibility on the perpetrators.

People were classified as Jews based on their blood. A person was considered Jewish three or more of their grandparents were Jewish. The Nazi's did not care if someone had converted prior or wanted to covert. They disregarded how Jews classified themselves and instead assigned them their identity.

Why didn't the Jews leave?

Similar to the previous questions, the framing of this question blames the victim for their outcome. It also clumps together all Jews, simplifying the complexity of each country or even towns situations. In Germany, Jews were fully integrated into society. Some were decorated World War I veterans. Most importantly, many considered themselves Germans first and then Jewish. It was unthinkable that their country would harm them. The antisemitic laws, which started in 1933, were incremental. Many Jews believed that it couldn't and wouldn't get worse. Further, there were obstacles to escape. Some families had young children or elderly parents they didn't want to leave. Money posed another challenge. What is often ignored, is that Jews needed a place to immigrate to. Unfortunately, many Jews struggled to get the necessary documentation and countries that had Jewish quotas refused to accept additional applicants.

On November 9 -10, 1938, Kristallnacht, organized mass attacks on Jews, Jewish-owned shops, and synagogues, was a major turning point for Jews. Although many Jews desperately tried to leave Germany or Austria, they faced many of the obstacles stated above. As the Nazis expanded and occupied other countries, some Jews faced little time to respond and formulate a plan of action. For example, Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, and just one week later, on September 8, 1939, the German army marched into Lodz.

What is most important to get across is that the Holocaust was not inevitable. Jews did not know what was about to happen.

What about Jewish collaborators?

The Jews were victims. The scholar, Lawrence Langer studied testimonies of Holocaust survivors and argues that victims of the Holocaust, Jews in particular, did not have the option of making moral choices as we know them in the normal world. He also points out how difficult it is for Holocaust survivors to review their actions during the Holocaust when they committed deeds that today, in a normal environment, they would consider morally reprehensible.

“Choiceless Choice”

For the last twenty years, Langer has studied and written about the testimonies of Holocaust survivors. What comes across for him again and again is that victims of the Third Reich--Jews in particular--did not have the option of making moral choices as we know them in the normal world. Thrust into situations of starvation, filth and crowding, survivors placed acts for their survival over consideration for the well-being or safety of others, whether they were strangers or close friends and relatives. Students, Langer stresses, must understand that the victims were not responsible for their treatment in the Third Reich: they had been classified as non-human, worthy of extermination and treated according to the classification rather than their specific actions or deeds. Langer also points out how difficult it is for Holocaust survivors to review their actions during the Holocaust when they committed deeds that today, in a normal environment, they would consider morally reprehensible. How can and do survivors cope with knowing of their past actions which are so antithetical to their present behavior and values?

Lawrence Langer

From: Facing History and Ourselves: Elements of Time, 1989. Appendix, pp. 349 – 350.