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Minority Vulnerability and Ethical Hope: *Maus* and *Terezínské ghetto* in Czech Holocaust Education

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Abstract

This article compares two excerpts for Czech lower-secondary Holocaust education: a page from Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and an excerpt from Veronika Válková and Petr Kopl's *Terezínské ghetto: Tajemný vlak do neznáma*. Using comparative close reading, multimodal analysis and a minority-sensitive lens, it examines imposed Jewish visibility, racialisation, constrained agency, and ethical hope. In *Maus*, a disguised Vladek is publicly identified as Jewish by children and survives through performative alignment with the Nazi order; in *Terezínské ghetto*, Bára's child focalisation and recognition of Terezín (German: Theresienstadt) scaffold historical concepts through an outsider perspective. The article argues for different pedagogical affordances rather than demonstrated learning effects and defines "ethical hope" as a bounded possibility for action, relation, or temporary survival that neither denies catastrophe nor produces redemptive closure. The comparison shows how literary form can support historically specific discussion of antisemitism and minority vulnerability when interpretation remains anchored in historical context and textual evidence.

Keywords: Jewish minority; antisemitism; Holocaust education; graphic narrative

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Introduction

Holocaust education in Europe operates within a persistent tension. It is expected to transmit historically accurate knowledge about the persecution and murder of European Jews and other targeted groups while also contributing to civic education, anti-racist learning, human rights literacy, and the prevention of antisemitism. These aims are not inherently incompatible, but they become ethically fragile when historical specificity is replaced by generic moral feeling, when Jewishness appears only as victimhood, or when affect is mobilised without sufficient conceptual and source-critical work. Recent scholarship on digital Holocaust memory identifies a related representational risk: Presner et al. (2026) use the term "Holocaust vibe" for emotionally plausible representations that flatten historical complexity and reproduce familiar narrative templates. Although the present article does not analyse artificial intelligence, this concept sharpens a problem relevant to literary pedagogy as well: recognisable Holocaust affect should not be mistaken for historically grounded understanding. This article addresses that problem through a comparative analysis of two classroom-ready samples: a Czech-language page from Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and a prose excerpt from Veronika Válková and Petr Kopl's *Terezínské ghetto: Tajemný vlak do neznáma* [*Terezín Ghetto: The Mysterious Train into the Unknown*]. The samples are comparable not because they stage the same form of child vulnerability: in *Maus*, children publicly identify the disguised Jewish adult Vladek and thereby trigger a crisis of recognition; in *Terezínské ghetto*, the limited knowledge of a contemporary child, Bára, structures the gradual recognition of the ghetto. The comparison therefore focuses on imposed identity, knowledge, representation, and constrained forms of hope rather than on a shared child-rescue plot.

The relationship between Holocaust studies and minority studies is not self-evident and should not be treated as settled. Debates over Holocaust uniqueness and comparison show the risks both of isolating the event from broader analytical frames and of assimilating it too quickly to generic accounts of persecution (Pleasants, 2016). The Nazi regime did not persecute Jews as a "minority" in the contemporary rights-based sense; it constructed "the Jew" as a racialised and political enemy whose exclusion and destruction were central to Nazi antisemitism. I therefore use minority studies as a present-day analytical lens, not as a historical category attributed to the Nazi regime. Throughout this article, *minority studies* refers to interdisciplinary scholarship concerned with how groups marked as different are constituted, represented and governed through law, institutions, discourse, and unequal power. *Minority-sensitive Holocaust education* refers more narrowly to pedagogical practice that makes such processes visible while preserving the historical specificity of antisemitism and Jewish persecution and avoiding the reduction of Jewish life either to victimhood or to a generic example of diversity. Brubaker's warning against treating groups as internally homogeneous substances is central here: "Jewish identity" is not assumed to be a single essence, and the analysis distinguishes imposed Nazi categorisation from diverse Jewish cultural, national, linguistic, and religious self-identifications (Brubaker, 2004).

For an international readership, the Czech educational setting also requires specification. "Lower-secondary education" refers here primarily to the second stage of Czech basic schooling, typically attended by pupils aged approximately 11–15. After 1989, Holocaust education in the Czech Republic developed from a comparatively marginal topic into an established element of history education, although its curricular positioning and pedagogical framing have continued to evolve (Frankl, 2003). More recent research has examined the anchoring of the Shoah in Czech normative curricular documents as well as the understandings brought to the topic by future teachers (Mašát, 2024). The present article is therefore written for an international readership in Holocaust education, literary pedagogy, and minority studies while remaining situated in the specific curricular and cultural conditions of Czech lower-secondary education.

The article asks three research questions. First, how do the two samples construct imposed Jewish vulnerability and constrained agency? Here, *agency* means the capacity to interpret, respond, conceal, seek help or otherwise act within coercive conditions; it does not imply autonomy or freedom from structural violence. Second, how do graphic narrative and historical prose distribute interpretive work among text, image, focalisation and reader? Third, what pedagogical affordances and risks do these representational choices create for minority-sensitive Holocaust education? The analysis does not ask which text "works better" for pupils because no learner-outcome data are available. Its claim is narrower: the two excerpts organise historical knowledge and ethical interpretation differently, and those differences can be formulated as theoretically grounded hypotheses for teaching and future classroom research.

The article is deliberately modest in its empirical claims. It does not report a statistical classroom experiment and it does not generalise from pupils' handwritten responses as if they were a representative sample. The primary evidence comprises two teaching samples: the selected *Maus* page and worksheet architecture, and the scanned chapter from *Terezínské ghetto*. The method is qualitative, comparative, and interpretive. It is evidence-based in the sense that every claim about the primary material is grounded in observable features of the excerpts, while the broader educational and minority-rights claims are supported by relevant scholarship and policy literature. This distinction is important. A comparative close reading can make strong claims about textual affordances, representational risks, and pedagogical possibilities; on its own, it cannot prove learning outcomes. The article therefore argues for a plausible and theoretically grounded use of these materials, not for a tested intervention effect.

The contribution is threefold. First, it brings a minority-studies lens to two Holocaust representations while explicitly treating comparison as subordinate to historical specificity. Second, it develops "ethical hope" as a text-analytic category for distinguishing limited possibilities of action, relation, and orientation from redemptive or resilience-based narratives. Third, it translates the comparison into a classroom sequence framed as a theoretically grounded proposal for future empirical testing rather than as evidence of learning outcomes. The article's novelty therefore lies not in claiming that Holocaust education can address

exclusion or civic responsibility in general, but in showing how these two specific classroom texts organise such questions through different representational forms.

Analytical framework: minority studies, racialisation and Holocaust pedagogy

A minority-sensitive approach must begin by distinguishing historical categories from present-day analytical ones. Nazi antisemitism constructed Jews not as a protected minority but as an existential racial and political enemy. "Racial enemy" here refers to the Nazi fusion of antisemitic conspiracy, descent-based thinking, and political exclusion through which people classified as Jewish were represented as an inherited threat to the German national community. Law and bureaucracy increasingly used descent-based criteria to identify, exclude, dispossess, and deport those defined as Jewish, but this process should not be reduced to a single coherent "racial-state" logic. Recent historiography has cautioned against treating race as the sole explanatory principle of Nazi governance and has emphasised the internally heterogeneous meanings and operations of racial discourse (Pendas et al., 2017). In the Czech lands, these processes intersected with specific histories of Jewish belonging, nationalism, occupation and persecution that require attention in their own right (Čapková, 2012; Frommer, 2021). Contemporary minority-rights theory functions here only as a normative contrast: where liberal minority-rights frameworks seek to protect membership and cultural security (Kymlicka, 1995), Nazi policy transformed imposed categorisation into a mechanism of exclusion and destruction.

The two samples make imposed categorisation legible in different ways. In *Maus*, Jews are represented as mice, Germans as cats, and Poles as pigs, but the selected page also foregrounds masking and passing. Vladek, a Jewish adult hiding outside the ghetto, is recognised by children as Jewish; their shouts of accusation threaten to expose him, and his response – approaching them, using the greeting "Heil Hitler" and denying that he is Jewish – shows how survival can require performative use of the persecutory order's own signs. The children are therefore not endangered Jewish figures in this scene; they are social actors through whom an antisemitic stereotype learned from adults is reproduced. In *Terezínské ghetto*, by contrast, racialisation is mediated through Bára's questions about the yellow star, the word "Aryan", the ghetto, and rules of movement. Her ignorance is a narrative device through which historical concepts are gradually disclosed.

Holocaust-education scholarship and policy support this movement from affect to historically grounded interpretation. Totten and Feinberg (2016) emphasise the need to combine historical accuracy with pedagogically appropriate methods and include explicit discussion of literature, primary accounts, and age-appropriate instruction. The second edition of the IHRA *Recommendations for Teaching and Learning about the Holocaust*, published in 2026, expands guidance for younger learners on antisemitism, digital technologies, professional development, Holocaust sites, and survivor testimony (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, 2026). Its treatment of imaginative and literary sources is particularly

relevant to the present comparison because literary engagement must remain connected to source criticism and historical contextualisation. UNESCO and OSCE/ODIHR likewise locate education about antisemitism within human-rights and citizenship education (OSCE/ODIHR & UNESCO, 2018). These frameworks do not justify turning the Holocaust into a generic anti-prejudice lesson. Rather, they support a two-level approach: to preserve the specificity of Jewish persecution while asking analytically cautious questions about classification, exclusion, and group-targeted hatred.

The contemporary relevance of the problem is not speculative. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights' 2024 survey reports that antisemitism remains a major concern for Jewish people in the EU and that many respondents avoid open expression of Jewish identity because of fear or insecurity (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024). Such findings do not mean that a classroom reading of *Maus* or *Terezínské ghetto* should be instrumentalised as a response to current politics. They do mean that the study of Jewish minority representation has contemporary civic significance. If antisemitism affects how Jewish people can live openly in Europe, then education that analyses how Jewish visibility has historically been made dangerous can contribute to a more precise civic vocabulary.

By *child focalisation*, I mean the organisation of narrative information through what a child character perceives, knows, misunderstands, and can articulate; it is a structure of access to knowledge, not simply the presence of children in a scene. This term applies directly to Bára in *Terezínské ghetto*, whose limited knowledge controls the pace of historical disclosure. It applies differently to the selected *Maus* page, where the children do not focalise Vladek's experience but function as social actors who reproduce an antisemitic stereotype learned from adults. Scholarship on Holocaust writing for young readers is relevant here because it emphasises the tension between accessibility and historical distortion (Kokkola, 2003; Bosmajian, 2002), while work on narrative cognition helps explain how perspective structures readers' access to social and ethical knowledge (Nikolajeva, 2014). The comparison therefore does not claim that both texts use child focalisation in the same way; rather, it contrasts a child-centred structure of knowing with a scene in which children themselves become part of the historical problem to be interpreted.

Visual and multimodal theory helps explain why the two samples work differently. Kress and van Leeuwen treat images not as illustrations subordinate to language but as semiotic structures that organise salience, gaze, framing, and power (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). In graphic narratives, sequence and layout further determine meaning; panels create gaps that readers must bridge, while words and images may reinforce, complicate, or contradict one another (McCloud, 1993; Hatfield, 2005; Groensteen, 2007). *Maus* is exemplary in this respect because it requires readers to interpret gesture, composition, speech balloons, and page rhythm simultaneously. In contrast, *Terezínské ghetto* is primarily prose, but the examined sample's dark page design, silhouettes, and illustrations create a visual atmosphere of enclosure. It is therefore not purely verbal; it uses image as mood, threshold, and historical shadow rather than as panel-by-panel narration.

The final conceptual term is *ethical hope*. I use it neither as a synonym for optimism nor as a celebration of resilience. LaCapra's distinction between working-through and premature closure supplies one premise: meaning-making should not cancel the wound it examines (LaCapra, 2001). Greenspan's work adds a different caution, showing why Holocaust recounting should not be reduced to fixed and completed "testimony" but understood as contingent and dialogic retelling (Greenspan, 2019). Hartman's *Holocaust and Hope* similarly situates hope within problems of witnessing, mediation and the limits of representation rather than simple recovery (Hartman, 2026), while recent work on resilience warns that celebratory narratives of survivor "success" can obscure material and structural conditions (Moyer & Sheftel, 2026). Against that background, *ethical hope* is defined here as a textually represented, historically bounded possibility for action, relation, orientation or temporary survival that remains compatible with fear, loss and unresolved catastrophe. It is an analytical category for reading representation, not a claim that Holocaust experience was hopeful or that learners should leave the classroom feeling hopeful.

Materials and method

The first sample is a Czech-language teaching worksheet built around one page from Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. The selected page comes from Part I, Chapter 6, during the period when Vladek and Anja are hiding outside the ghetto and considering escape to Hungary. Vladek, disguised as a non-Jewish Pole, passes children who identify him as Jewish and run to call their mothers. Rather than flee, he approaches them, uses the greeting "Heil Hitler", and denies that he is Jewish. The immediate danger passes, although Vladek retrospectively describes the encounter as intensely frightening (Spiegelman, 2012). The page therefore concerns public recognition, masking, antisemitic socialisation, and constrained self-protection, rather than the rescue of Jewish children. Its placement within *Maus* also matters: the episode is embedded in Vladek's retrospective survivor account as narrated to Art, and thus belongs to the work's larger father-son testimony structure. The worksheet asks learners to summarise the excerpt, identify emotions, formulate its main meaning, distinguish hopelessness from hope, and consider how text and image shape interpretation.

The second sample comes from chapter 5 of Veronika Válková and Petr Kopl's *Terezínské ghetto: Tajemný vlak do neznáma* [*Terezín Ghetto: The Mysterious Train into the Unknown*], one of the volumes in the *Kouzelný atlas putování časem* [*Magic Atlas of Time Travel*] series. The series follows Bára, a contemporary Czech girl whose encounters with the past are organised through time travel. In the selected chapter, Bára enters wartime Terezín (German: Theresienstadt) without initially understanding where or when she is; she sees a cart with corpses, encounters the yellow star and antisemitic language, mistakes a girl in the ghetto for one of her classmates, and gradually learns that she is in the Jewish ghetto in 1944 (Válková & Kopl, 2013). The excerpt is therefore not a self-contained realist testimony but part of a historical-adventure framework in which a contemporary outsider can enter and later leave a space from which historical Jewish inhabitants could not simply exit. That asymmetry is central to the analysis below.

The samples were selected because both stage the consequences of antisemitic categorisation and make interpretation depend on limited or unstable knowledge, not because both depict endangered Jewish children. In *Maus*, the selected page concerns an adult Jewish survivor exposed by children's antisemitic recognition; in *Terezínské ghetto*, a contemporary child outsider encounters Jewish children and the ghetto system through gradual discovery. Their representational asymmetry is precisely what makes comparison useful: one text compresses passing, recognition and self-protection into a graphic scene, while the other distributes historical discovery across a time-travel narrative. Comparing them therefore makes it possible to examine how different media and narrative positions organise the relation between historical knowledge, imposed identity and constrained action.

The method combines three approaches. The first is comparative close reading, understood as attention to narrative sequence, character positioning, diction, imagery and implied reader. The second is multimodal discourse analysis, especially for the page from *Maus* and for the visual atmosphere of the excerpt from *Terezínské ghetto*. The third is minority-sensitive educational interpretation: the analysis asks how the materials represent Jewish identity, racialisation, civic exclusion and possible solidarity. The coding categories used for comparison were developed deductively from the research questions and inductively refined while examining the samples:

1) signs of imposed identity;
2) spaces of surveillance and restriction;
3) child focalisation and knowledge gaps;
4) forms of fear, disgust, shame, solidarity, and hope;
5) medium-specific affordances; and
6) pedagogical risks.

Throughout the analysis, *pedagogical affordance* means a possibility made available by the text or task structure, not a demonstrated learning effect. Interpretive claims are therefore tied to observable features such as lexical choice, panel sequence, visual coding, focalisation, spatial markers, plot position, or worksheet prompt.

This is not a human-participant study. The article does not use individual pupils' answers as data and does not make claims about measurable learning outcomes. The worksheet design is analysed as a pedagogical artefact because it shows which interpretive questions the *Maus* excerpt was made to support. Where handwritten responses are visible in the scanned material, they are not treated as evidence of a population or quoted as participant data. This decision is both methodological and ethical. The article's evidence is the content and form of the two teaching samples, not the psychological state of any learner. Future classroom research could test the framework proposed here with appropriate consent, anonymisation and institutional review.

The limitations follow from that design. A two-sample comparison cannot represent the full range of Holocaust literature for children, Czech curriculum practice, or student

reception. It cannot determine whether graphic narrative is generally more effective than prose or whether a particular age group learns more from one text than the other. Its strength lies elsewhere: it can clarify what each sample affords, what each risks, and how combining them might enable a more precise conversation about minority vulnerability, antisemitism, and ethical hope. Such clarification is useful because teachers often choose literary materials for Holocaust education under conditions of limited time and high emotional pressure. A carefully argued comparison can support more responsible selection and sequencing.

These limitations also constrain the level of pedagogical claim. The theoretical vocabulary used in the analysis – racialisation, imposed visibility, focalisation, constrained agency, and multimodal form – represents analytical vocabulary for researchers and teachers, not language that lower-secondary pupils are assumed to reproduce independently. Classroom use would require staged, age-appropriate scaffolding. Future research should therefore test the proposed sequence through lesson observation, pupils' work, as well as teacher and pupil reflection, asking whether learners can distinguish imposed categorisation from Jewish self-identification, justify affective responses with textual and historical evidence, and differentiate limited hope from redemptive closure. Such research would evaluate rather than assume the pedagogical affordances proposed here.

The language of the analysis is also limited by translation: the samples are in Czech. English renderings of short source phrases are literal working translations and are used only when necessary for analysis. The article avoids extended quotation from the primary texts. This is not only a copyright consideration; it also reduces the risk of reproducing racialising language without sufficient context. When slurs or perpetrator categories appear in the source material, the analysis treats them as objects of study rather than as neutral descriptors.

Comparative analysis

Table 1. Comparative matrix of the two analysed samples.

Analytical dimension	***Maus* excerpt**	***Terezínské ghetto* excerpt**	**Pedagogical implication**
Identity	A disguised Jewish adult is publicly identified; masking and speech become tools of constrained self-protection.	Jewishness is learned through signs, slurs, stars, and explanations.	Analyse imposed categorisation and constrained agency rather than treating identity as essence.
Space	The street and the tram become sites of passing, exposure, and public recognition.	Walls, gates, streets, attics, and crowded rooms structure confinement.	Analyse ordinary spaces as a tool of minority governance.
Medium	Images, words, and sequences create compressed crisis.	Prose focalisation creates delayed historical understanding.	Compare how different forms distribute interpretive work.

Analytical dimension	*Maus* excerpt	*Terezínské ghetto* excerpt	Pedagogical implication
Hope	Temporary escape from exposure depends on disguise, performance, and luck; no altruistic rescue occurs in the selected page.	Hope appears as shelter, knowledge, help, and relation.	Distinguish hope, survival, rescue, and consolation through evidence and limits.

Note: This matrix summarises the comparative findings developed in the following subsections.

Imposed identity and racialising language

The most important commonality is not that both texts present the same "Jewish identity", but that both stage a gap between lived or self-understood identity and hostile external categorisation. In *Maus*, a disguised Vladek is publicly named as a Jew by children. The danger lies in recognition: the shouted label threatens to undo his attempt to pass as non-Jewish. His response – approaching the children and mothers, using the greeting "Heil Hitler" and denying that he is Jewish – shows agency under extreme constraint, because self-protection requires performing the very social order that endangers him. In *Terezínské ghetto*, by contrast, Jewishness is initially encountered by Bára as a set of signs, words, and restrictions that she does not understand. The comparison therefore concerns two different relations between identity and categorisation: concealment under threat in *Maus* and belated recognition by an outsider focaliser in *Terezínské ghetto*.

The animal imagery intensifies this mechanism. Spiegelman's animalisation has sometimes been misread as a simple allegory in which each group has a fixed essence. The page itself undermines that reading. Masks, costumes, gestures, and speech make identity appear constructed and policed. The category may be visually legible, but it is also unstable enough to require performance and misdirection. This instability is the ethical point. Racial categories in the Nazi order were treated as natural truths, yet they had to be produced through documents, public rituals, signs and violence. The *Maus* excerpt makes the violence visible while also making the artificiality of the system visible. It therefore offers a powerful entry point for discussing racialisation with pupils who may otherwise think of racism only as individual dislike.

Terezínské ghetto approaches imposed identity through a specifically Czech narrative frame. Bára's contemporary associations – family talk, jokes, stereotypes, and the Czech language – do not represent Jewish identity in general; they stage how a non-Jewish Czech child interprets signs of Jewishness through her own social environment. This distinction matters because Jewish identities in the Bohemian lands before the Holocaust were internally diverse and could be articulated through Czech, German, Jewish-national, religious, and other affiliations (Čapková, 2012). In the excerpt, the yellow star and antisemitic slur belong to the regime's imposed categorisation, whereas humour, names, family relationships, and everyday speech point towards forms of Jewish life that cannot be reduced to that category. Teachers

should therefore distinguish three levels: Bára's contemporary assumptions; historical Jewish self-identifications; and the Nazi classification imposed upon Jews.

At the same time, the *Terezínské ghetto* excerpt carries a risk. Because Bára is a non-Jewish modern-day child who temporarily enters the ghetto, readers may identify primarily with her confusion rather than with Jewish lived experience. This is a familiar problem in historical fiction for young readers: an outsider focaliser can scaffold understanding, but may also recentre the majority learner. The sample mitigates that risk by making Bára's ignorance repeatedly inadequate. She is not rewarded for not knowing. She misreads the city, misreads people, misreads language and needs others to explain what the regime has made dangerous. Her perspective is useful precisely because it is corrected. Teachers should preserve this corrective structure and avoid presenting Bára as the sole moral centre of the text.

The comparison therefore presents two different relations between categorisation and knowledge. *Maus* begins with exposure: Vladek knows the danger of being recognised as Jewish and attempts to manage the category through disguise and performance. *Terezínské ghetto* begins with misrecognition: Bára does not yet understand the historical code she is encountering. In a classroom sequence, this asymmetry can be used analytically rather than as evidence of a predetermined learner response. The prose excerpt can be used to introduce the star, ghettoisation and the term "Aryan" as historical concepts; the graphic excerpt can then be used to examine how a hostile category becomes dangerous in an ordinary public encounter. Reversing the order would test a different pedagogical hypothesis: whether affective urgency benefits from subsequent historical unpacking. The present study does not determine which sequence produces better learning.

Space, visibility, and surveillance

Both samples use ordinary space to make coercive classification visible, but in different ways. In *Maus*, the selected street scene follows Vladek's movement through occupied urban space while he is passing as a Pole. The danger is public recognition: children identify him as Jewish, call their mothers and force him to manage the encounter in the open. The street and tram are therefore not rescue devices; they are part of a city in which movement depends on being read correctly by others. In *Terezínské ghetto*, by contrast, walls, gates, streets, attics, and crowded rooms organise Bára's gradual recognition of confinement. The comparison shows two spatial scales of persecution: the unstable mobility of a person passing outside the ghetto and the institutional enclosure of ghetto space.

In *Terezínské ghetto*, space is larger and slower. Bára wakes into a city that seems empty, bounded, abnormal, and historically displaced. She reads walls, gates, streets, and signs before she understands the political order. Her first hypotheses are wrong: the place resembles a medieval town, a future city, or a space threatened by criminals. This delayed recognition is narratively important because the text temporarily withholds the name and historical meaning of Terezín, requiring the reader to infer confinement from spatial clues before receiving explicit explanation. I use "defamiliarisation" here to describe that narrative

technique, not to assume that Czech pupils are unfamiliar with Terezín; the present study contains no empirical evidence about their prior knowledge of the site. The reader learns that walls, checkpoints, school buildings, attics, and crowded rooms are not neutral settings but part of a regime of confinement.

Historians have studied Terezín for generations. H. G. Adler's foundational study, first published in 1955 and available in English translation since 2017, established an exceptionally detailed account of the ghetto's coerced social world; more recent scholarship has re-examined everyday life, social relations and power within the ghetto (Adler, 2017; Hájková, 2020). For the wider history of Jews in the Bohemian lands and of the Holocaust in Bohemia and Moravia, Čapková (2012) and Frommer (2021) provide essential context. I use the Czech place-name *Terezín* throughout the article, with *Theresienstadt* retained in cited titles and in occasional parenthetical clarification for an international readership. The site functioned as a ghetto, transit site, and propaganda site, while everyday life was shaped by deportation, hunger, overcrowding, administration, cultural activity, and extreme inequality. The excerpt's representational strategy is to present effects before explanations: Bára encounters spatial and social anomalies before she can name the historical order that produced them.

The visual atmospheres also differ. *Maus* presents space through panel sequence and dense black-and-white contrast, while *Terezínské ghetto* presents space primarily through prose surrounded by a dark page design and silhouettes. The difference is temporal and interpretive rather than simply a contrast between "dynamic" and "atmospheric" danger. *Maus* compresses recognition, threat, and response into a rapid sequence of panels, whereas *Terezínské ghetto* extends uncertainty across prose narration and visual page design, allowing historical explanation to emerge gradually. The two media therefore regulate the pace at which information becomes available to the reader in different ways.

Visibility is ambivalent in both samples, but any transfer from these scenes to contemporary minority politics must remain bounded by the genocidal context. In *Maus*, being recognised as Jewish creates immediate danger for a person attempting to pass; in *Terezínské ghetto*, stars, papers, gates, and rules make imposed identity administratively visible. These representations can support analysis of how classification and surveillance operate, but they should not be treated as directly equivalent to ordinary minority governance in democratic contexts. The transferable element is the analytical question – who classifies, who names, which institutions enforce the category and with what consequences – not historical equivalence.

Medium, focalisation, and readerly responsibility

The difference between graphic narrative and prose is not simply a matter of pictures versus words. It is a difference in how responsibility for meaning is distributed. In *Maus*, readers must integrate image, text, and sequence. A speech balloon can contradict or intensify a facial expression; a gesture can carry ethical information not stated in words; a panel border can isolate a moment while the gutter demands inference. McCloud's concept of closure is useful here: comics ask readers to connect discrete moments into continuous action (McCloud,

1993). In the selected page, that work of closure is not ethically neutral. Readers must infer fear, strategy, risk, and relief from a compressed sequence of public threat.

The worksheet used with the page from *Maus* explicitly directs attention to whether image or text most strongly shapes interpretation and asks learners to identify a visual detail that influenced their response. This is analytically important because the selected page cannot be reduced to its dialogue: masks, panel transitions, bodily positioning, and the escalation from the children's accusation to the mothers' response contribute to the scene's meaning. The task therefore affords a move from affective reaction to semiotic justification – for example, from "the scene feels threatening" to "the threat is intensified by the sequence in which Vladek's attempted anonymity is broken by public recognition". The complete worksheet is not reproduced here. The teacher-authored prompts may be provided as supplementary material, subject to copyright and journal policy, while the copyrighted *Maus* artwork should be cited rather than reproduced without permission.

Terezínské ghetto distributes responsibility differently. The reader's main task is to track Bára's changing knowledge. Because Bára does not understand the ghetto at first, readers who know more than she does experience dramatic irony, while readers who know less learn alongside her. The prose controls revelation through questions, misinterpretations, and corrections. This makes the text accessible, but it also demands careful teaching. If pupils read only at the level of adventure – "Will Bára escape?"; "Who will help her?" – they may miss the historical and minority-related meanings. The teacher must therefore help them identify when Bára's questions are actually historical concepts in narrative form: "What is the star?"; "What is a ghetto?"; "Who counts as 'Aryan'?"; "Why are people being transported?"; "Why is language dangerous?".

The asymmetry in the position of the children is especially important here. Bára is the focaliser of *Terezínské ghetto*: the reader tracks what she sees, knows and misunderstands. In the selected page from *Maus*, by contrast, the children are not focalisers but participants in a social act of antisemitic recognition. Their shouted identification of Vladek shows how prejudice can be transmitted into children's speech, while Vladek's response demonstrates the constrained agency of a Jewish adult attempting to survive through disguise and performance. This distinction strengthens rather than weakens the comparison: one text uses a child's ignorance as a route towards knowledge, whereas the other shows children already possessing a socially learned, dangerous "knowledge" about Jews. The pedagogical question is therefore not whether innocence explains violence, but how children are positioned differently in relation to knowledge, prejudice and power.

Graphic narrative also raises the question of abstraction and mediation. Chute (2016) is the primary formal reference here: comics can function as documentary witness while simultaneously displaying the labour, gaps and constructedness of representation. Hirsch's (2012) concept of postmemory is relevant at a different level because *Maus* is a second-generation work shaped by the mediated inheritance of a parent's traumatic past. These frameworks should not be collapsed. Chute helps explain the medium's documentary

and formal operations; Hirsch helps situate Art Spiegelman's relation to inherited memory. The contribution of the present article is narrower still: it asks how those representational operations become pedagogical affordances and risks when a single page from *Maus* is paired with Czech historical fiction for lower-secondary use.

The *Terezínské ghetto* sample raises a parallel question about historical fiction. The time-travel frame is fictional, but it is used to organise contact with historically grounded detail. This creates an accessible bridge between a modern-day child and the past. The risk is that the device might make the ghetto seem like a temporary adventure zone from which the protagonist can exit. The text counters this risk through encounters with characters who cannot simply leave. Bára's mobility becomes ethically uncomfortable: she has an outside, while the Jewish children she meets inhabit a regime of confinement and deportation. Teachers should make that asymmetry explicit. The point is not to condemn the narrative device, but to analyse what it makes possible and what it might obscure.

Hope without consolation

The worksheet foregrounds hope by asking whether hope is inappropriate in Holocaust stories and what hope might mean in war or catastrophe. In the selected page from *Maus*, however, hope should not be described as the rescue of threatened children. The endangered figure is Vladek himself. His immediate survival depends on disguise, quick judgement, performative conformity, and luck: when children publicly identify him as Jewish, he approaches rather than flees, uses the Nazi greeting and denies Jewish identity. The scene therefore represents a deeply compromised survival possibility rather than an altruistic rescue. Its ethical difficulty lies in the fact that survival requires Vladek to manipulate the same racialised signs and political language that endanger him. Hope, if the term is used at all here, is momentary and non-redemptive: the scene ends in escape from immediate exposure, not moral resolution.

Terezínské ghetto offers a different structure of hope. Bára's hope initially takes the form of ordinary problem-solving: find a way out, find shelter, find a police station, find someone who will explain. These hopes are repeatedly corrected by the ghetto's reality. Later, limited possibility appears in relational form – help from Petr, shared knowledge, a place to hide, a candle, a cup, a promise of assistance. Unlike the selected *Maus* page, where temporary survival depends on passing and performance, this excerpt distributes orientation and temporary safety across social relations. The contrast is interpretive rather than empirical: it identifies different representational structures that a teacher could ask learners to compare.

Because this study does not observe learner responses, the following point is a hypothesis about affordance, not an empirical conclusion. Read in isolation, the page from *Maus* makes self-protective escape from public recognition the most salient limited possibility, whereas the *Terezínské ghetto* excerpt distributes limited possibilities across Bára's search for orientation, shelter and help. Juxtaposing them could therefore support a classroom distinction between hope, rescue, survival and optimism. Whether pupils actually make that distinction, and with what degree of historical understanding, requires future classroom research.

This point is better framed through scholarship on non-closure and contingent witnessing. LaCapra's account of working-through cautions against narratives that convert trauma into premature closure (LaCapra, 2001). Greenspan likewise argues against treating Holocaust survivor recounting as a fixed and completed "testimony", emphasising instead the contingent and dialogic processes of telling and listening (Greenspan, 2019). For the present article, these approaches support a limited claim: hope should be treated as an interpretive proposition that requires textual and historical evidence, not as a moral lesson imposed in advance. Students can therefore be asked: What exactly counts as hope in this scene? Who has access to it? What structures limit it? Does it depend on deception, another person's risk or temporary shelter? What remains unresolved?

The two excerpts do not represent hope as relational in the same way. *Terezínské ghetto* repeatedly links Bára's orientation and temporary safety to help from others. *Maus* instead foregrounds self-protection within a hostile social interaction: Vladek survives not because someone rescues him but because the children and mothers accept his performance of non-Jewishness. The common denominator is therefore not heroic solidarity but dependence on unstable social relations, signs and circumstances. This is why "ethical hope" here must remain narrower than resilience or moral uplift: it names limited possibilities for continued action or relation under conditions that remain structurally violent.

At the same time, the Holocaust cannot be taught as a story in which limited possibilities regularly succeed. Terezín was a site of deprivation, deportation and transit to Auschwitz and other killing sites, and many children imprisoned there did not survive (Adler, 2017; Hájková, 2020; Frommer, 2021). The selected *Maus* episode likewise sits within a narrative of escalating persecution that culminates in Vladek and Anja's deportation to Auschwitz. Any moment of escape or temporary safety must therefore remain situated within the larger structure of genocide. Ethical hope can be analysed as a local representational feature, but it must not govern the historical meaning of the Holocaust.

Pedagogical affordances and risks

The strongest pedagogical affordance of the *Maus* sample is its capacity to make form itself an object of analysis. The worksheet's questions about whether comics can be serious literature and whether image affects interpretation invite attention to layout, expression, sequence, speech and symbolic coding. The page is therefore not an "easier" substitute for prose but a compact multimodal text whose meaning depends on relations among visual and verbal signs. In the absence of classroom outcome data, I treat this as an affordance of the text and task design rather than as evidence that pupils' visual literacy is actually improved.

The principal risk of the *Maus* sample is decontextualisation. A single page can be misread if learners do not know that the speaker is Vladek, that the scene occurs in Part I, Chapter 6 while he is passing as non-Jewish, and that the animal masks are part of the work's unstable symbolic treatment of racial categorisation rather than fixed biological essences. Teachers using the excerpt therefore need to frame both its position within Vladek's narrated

survival history and its place within the larger father-son testimony structure of *Maus*. The symbolism of the animal code, masking and passing must be analysed rather than treated as decorative illustration.

The strongest pedagogical affordance of *Terezínské ghetto* is scaffolding. Bára's ignorance resembles the learner's possible ignorance, and the text provides narrative occasions for explanation. The excerpt's questions arise from the story rather than from a textbook list: Why are there walls? Why do people wear stars? Why can the word "Jew" become an insult? Why are people transported? What does it mean not to know where one's parents are? This makes the text particularly suitable for guided reading before or alongside historical instruction. It can prepare learners to receive factual information because it first makes them care about the problem of understanding.

The principal risk of *Terezínské ghetto* is adventure framing. Time travel, hiding, pursuit and discovery can make the text highly readable, but also risk converting historical confinement into a suspense setting. The excerpt avoids trivialisation by including fear, bodies, antisemitic language and uncertainty, yet the risk remains if teaching emphasises plot over context. The teacher should therefore pause the adventure rhythm at key points and ask historical questions. For example: What does Bára misunderstand? What information corrects her? Which characters have freedom of movement and which do not? What does the narrative allow the protagonist to escape that real ghetto inhabitants could not escape?

Both samples require careful handling of antisemitic language. *Terezínské ghetto* includes derogatory speech as part of its representation of the ghetto world and of Bára's learning about prejudice. Maus includes shouted identification and performative alignment with Nazi power. Such language should not be sanitised out of analysis, because doing so would hide the mechanism of humiliation and threat. But it should not be repeated casually either. A teacher might distinguish between mentioning a term as evidence, quoting a term for analysis, and using a term as speech. This distinction is part of education against antisemitism. It teaches that language has history and force.

A further affordance of comparison is the opportunity to question medium-based hierarchies without assuming in advance what pupils believe about comics or prose. *Maus* is short but interpretively dense; *Terezínské ghetto* is more continuous but depends on a fictional time-travel device. The analytical question is therefore not which medium is superior or easier, but what each makes visible, what each withholds and what contextual support each requires.

Finally, the comparison is designed to move discussion from affect towards responsibility, but that movement should be treated as a pedagogical aim rather than a demonstrated effect. The worksheet's focus on emotion and visual evidence and the Terezín excerpt's focus on confusion and explanation provide prompts through which teachers can ask what feelings reveal – and fail to reveal – about structures of exclusion. Whether learners actually make that move, and how much historical knowledge is required for them to do so, remains an empirical question.

Discussion: towards minority-sensitive Holocaust education

Holocaust education has long been asked to connect historically specific study with questions of civic responsibility and group-targeted hatred; that general proposition is not the novel claim of this article (Totten & Feinberg, 2016; International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, 2026). The contribution here is narrower: the comparison shows how two specific classroom texts organise imposed visibility, antisemitic naming, constrained agency and limited hope through different formal devices. Such comparison does not make the Holocaust interchangeable with other histories. The debate over Holocaust uniqueness and comparability warns precisely against assuming either absolute incommensurability or easy transfer (Pleasants, 2016). The genocide of European Jews emerged from historically particular ideological, administrative, military and collaborative structures. A minority studies lens is useful here only as an analytical vocabulary for examining categorisation, unequal power and vulnerability while those historical differences remain explicit.

One implication concerns the relation between historical knowledge and civic education. Current policy on Holocaust and antisemitism education emphasises fact-based, age-appropriate teaching, critical thinking, attention to antisemitism and careful source selection (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, 2026; OSCE/ODIHR & UNESCO, 2018). The two samples can serve those aims only if used with contextual care. Without context, *Maus* can become merely shocking and *Terezínské ghetto* merely adventurous. With context, *Maus* can make visible the danger of antisemitic recognition and passing in public space, while *Terezínské ghetto* can stage a contemporary child's gradual acquisition of historical vocabulary. The teacher's task is to keep literary experience and historical explanation in dialogue rather than assuming that one automatically produces the other.

A second implication concerns intersectionality, understood here as an analysis of interacting structures rather than a checklist of identities. In the two excerpts, age modifies the consequences and transmission of antisemitic categorisation, but it does so differently. In *Maus*, the children are not Jewish victims in the selected scene; they are part of the social environment through which antisemitic stereotypes are reproduced and a disguised Jewish adult is exposed. Their age therefore matters as a site of ideological transmission and limited responsibility, while Vladek's adult mobility and capacity to pass shape the options available to him. In *Terezínské ghetto*, Bára's age and gender shape her outsider vulnerability and the kinds of help she can seek, yet her contemporary non-Jewish status and time-travel mobility also give her forms of exit unavailable to historical Jewish children. Following Crenshaw (1989), the point is not to claim equivalence among these positions but to ask how age, gender, imposed Jewishness, status, and mobility intersect with institutional power. This differentiation also prevents "the Jewish child" or "Jewish identity" from becoming a single pedagogical figure.

A third implication concerns Jewish life beyond victimhood. The phrase "Jewish identity" should not function as a monolith here. Čapková's work on Bohemian Jewry demonstrates

the historical diversity of Czech-Jewish, German-Jewish, Jewish-national, and other forms of identification, while the Holocaust imposed categories that cut across and violently overrode such distinctions (Čapková, 2012). *Terezínské ghetto* partly opens space beyond victimhood through names, humour, relationships, and everyday speech; *Maus* does so through family memory, disagreement, testimony, and individual agency under constraint. Teachers can extend the excerpts by introducing Jewish life and diversity before, during and after the Holocaust, as recommended in education addressing antisemitism (OSCE/ODIHR & UNESCO, 2018). The pedagogical aim is not to add a generic "Jewish culture" supplement, but to prevent Nazi categorisation from becoming the learner's only framework for understanding Jews.

A fourth implication concerns the ethics of difficult affect. The samples are emotionally strong, but possible responses such as fear, disgust, pity, anger, or confusion should be treated as starting points for reflection rather than as proof of learning. A learner who feels pity for Jewish victims may still lack understanding of antisemitism; a learner shocked by a slur may still not understand how language becomes institutional violence; and a learner who admires an act of survival or assistance may still not understand the structural conditions that made such actions rare, risky and unequal. Teachers should therefore ask learners to justify emotional responses with textual evidence and historical concepts: What detail produced fear? What rule made the situation dangerous? What category did the regime impose? What action counted as help or self-protection, and what risk did it carry?

A fifth implication concerns sequencing. The two samples are strongest when used together but not simultaneously. One possible sequence begins with the Terezín excerpt to build spatial and conceptual understanding: star, ghetto, 'Aryan', transport, hiding, knowledge. The class can then read the page from *Maus* to analyse how such categories operate in a sudden public crisis. Another sequence begins with *Maus* to create interpretive urgency and then uses *Terezínské ghetto* to unpack the historical vocabulary behind that urgency. The best sequence depends on learners' prior knowledge. The worksheet's preliminary questions about prior encounter with Holocaust themes and serious comics are therefore not incidental; they are diagnostic tools that help the teacher decide how much scaffolding is needed.

A sixth implication concerns assessment. If the aim is minority-sensitive understanding, assessment should not ask only for plot recall. It can ask learners to identify mechanisms such as marking, naming, spatial restriction, exclusion, bystander behaviour, help, concealment, and the relation between image and text. Learners could compare how each sample represents the same concept – for example, visibility – and support their answer with evidence. They could explain why hope in a scene is not the same as optimism, or rewrite a generic statement such as "people were mean to Jews" into a historically more precise statement about racialised antisemitism, ghettoisation, and public danger. Such tasks are intentionally more demanding than plot recall or unstructured emotional response; their age-appropriateness and the level of scaffolding required should be treated as questions for future classroom testing rather than as outcomes established here.

Finally, the comparison has implications for the broader field of ethnopolitics and minority issues because governance is experienced through signs, language, bodies, and spaces as well as through law. That observation does not make literary representation equivalent to institutional analysis. Rather, it identifies a point of contact: cultural forms help organise how readers encounter categories of difference. Memory studies likewise emphasises that later generations approach catastrophic histories through mediated cultural forms rather than direct access to the past (Hirsch, 2012). Such narratives may reproduce stereotypes or sentimentality when historical and representational mediation is left unexamined. A carefully contextualised literary work can instead provide structured opportunities to analyse how cultural forms represent targeted groups, although the effect of that work on learners' civic understanding remains an empirical question.

A classroom sequence for comparative use

The following sequence is a theoretically derived teaching proposal, not a validated intervention; its feasibility, age-appropriateness, and learning effects require empirical evaluation.

The comparison can be translated into a concrete classroom sequence without reducing the texts to instruments. A first phase should establish historical orientation before detailed interpretation. Learners need basic knowledge of Nazi antisemitism, the coercive function of the yellow star, the meaning of ghettoisation, the difference between Terezín and extermination centres, and the fact that many transports from Terezín led to Auschwitz and other sites of death. In particular, pupils should understand that Nazi policy increasingly classified Jewishness through descent-based legal and bureaucratic criteria and made that classification visible through coercive signs and documents. This should not be taught as if the regime operated through one perfectly coherent biological-racial system; the category was produced through overlapping racial, political, nationalist, and antisemitic logics (Pendas et al., 2017).

A second phase can use *Terezínské ghetto* as guided discovery. Pupils can track Bára's mistaken hypotheses and write beside each one the historical concept that corrects it. For instance, her confusion about walls opens a discussion of ghetto space; her confusion about stars opens a discussion of compulsory marking; her encounter with derogatory language opens a discussion of antisemitic speech; her search for ordinary institutions opens a discussion of how occupation and ghettoisation reorganised everyday life. This phase should make clear that the protagonist's ignorance is a device for learning, not a model of adequate understanding. "The class should move from 'Bára does not know' to 'What knowledge does the scene require us to build?'".

A third phase can introduce the page from *Maus* as a concentrated test of that historical vocabulary. Pupils can identify who is being recognised, who speaks, what the children appear to have learned about Jews, how Vladek's mask and greeting function, and how the sequence turns public recognition into danger. The worksheet's questions about emotion and text-image relations can then be followed by evidential justification: which panel, gesture, utterance, or

symbolic device produced the interpretation, and what historical mechanism does it display? Such tasks are proposed here as scaffolds for interpretation rather than as evidence of what pupils will independently understand.

A fourth phase should bring the samples into explicit comparison. Possible paired claims include: in *Terezínské ghetto*, the yellow star is initially a puzzle for Bára; in *Maus*, the label "Jew" is already understood by the children as a dangerous social category. Or, in *Terezínské ghetto*, limited hope is represented through orientation, shelter, and help; in *Maus*, the selected page represents temporary survival through disguise, performance, and luck. The goal is analytical comparison, not a judgement about which text is "better". A strong response would also distinguish representation from historical generalisation and explain why neither limited hope nor temporary escape offers redemptive closure.

Such a sequence also offers assessment possibilities consistent with minority-sensitive aims. Pupils can be asked to explain one mechanism of racialisation with evidence from both samples, to compare how space restricts movement, or to distinguish empathy from historical understanding. More advanced learners can evaluate a statement such as "images make difficult history easier" by using the page from *Maus* as counter-evidence: images may be accessible, but they can also make reading more complex. In this way the two samples become not only sources of historical emotion but exercises in disciplined civic interpretation.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis has shown that the *Maus* graphic excerpt and the *Terezínské ghetto* prose excerpt organise minority vulnerability through different representational logics. *Maus* condenses racialised danger into a scene in which a disguised Jewish adult is publicly identified by children and protects himself through symbolic masking, verbal denial, and performative alignment with the Nazi order. Its ethical force lies in the tension among recognition, symbolism, constrained agency, and morally compromised performance: temporary escape is possible, but it remains precarious and non-redemptive. *Terezínské ghetto* expands danger through Bára's child focalisation and spatial exploration. Its ethical force lies in delayed understanding, as a contemporary outsider's confusion becomes a route into historical concepts concerning signs, walls, ghetto life, antisemitic speech, and deportation.

The samples therefore complement each other through asymmetry rather than parallel plots. *Maus* affords analysis of image-text simultaneity, passing, public recognition, and the instability and symbolism of racialised signs. *Terezínské ghetto* affords analysis of staged historical discovery and the limits of an outsider focaliser. Both reveal how Jewishness could be made dangerous through imposed categorisation, but they do not represent Jewish identity in the same way and should not be treated as interchangeable evidence. Ethical hope, where it is analytically useful, names only limited possibilities for action, orientation, or relation within structures that remain violent.

For teachers, the central recommendation is to keep three questions together. What happened historically? How does this medium represent it? What does the representation

teach about minority vulnerability and civic responsibility? If any one question is isolated, the pedagogical value weakens. Historical explanation without attention to form may become abstract; formal analysis without history may become aestheticism; civic response without either may become generic moralism. The two samples offer a way to resist all three reductions.

For minority studies, the article's narrower claim is that literary and graphic forms are relevant sites for analysing how categories of identity are represented and learned. This does not make Holocaust history a generic case study of minority politics. Rather, historically specific reading can clarify how imposed visibility, naming, symbolic coding, and spatial restriction operate within a genocidal context and can then support carefully bounded comparison. For Holocaust education, the comparison likewise demonstrates the importance of keeping three questions together: what happened historically, how a particular medium represents it, and what interpretive possibilities that representation makes available. Whether such classroom work changes learners' historical or civic understanding is a question for empirical research, not a conclusion of the present close reading.

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Statement regarding the use of generative AI

OpenAI ChatGPT was used to assist with drafting and revising portions of the manuscript in response to peer-review comments, language editing, structural revision, bibliographic checking, and the preparation of the point-by-point response to reviewers. The author independently reviewed and verified all arguments, interpretations, factual claims, citations, and final wording and takes full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.