

**Lessons We Can Learn Today From World War II: Roosje Glaser's War Story**

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**Abstract:**

Upholding democratic citizenship is an urgent priority for education systems around the world. There is an urgent need to equip young people with the skills to think, reflect, and act as responsible citizens in an increasingly complex and interconnected world. This article uses a specific context drawn from The Netherlands during World War II. It addresses the dilemmas faced and the choices made by a young woman named Roosje Glaser. Roosje's story engenders important questions that serve as the foundation for a series of lessons. The lessons challenge students to think critically about choices and dilemmas they may face in their own lives by addressing important issues related to freedom, human dignity, and democratic values. They provide a model for addressing existential dilemmas in a democratic society. The lessons engage students in a vivid interactive storytelling experience through compelling learning opportunities.

**Keywords:** democratic values, freedom, human dignity

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**Introduction**

During World War II, about six million Jews were killed in the Nazis' murder factories. Among them were about 102,000 Dutch Jews. "Never again Auschwitz!" is justly called out, but at the same time, we live in a world in which the nightmares of the past seem to be looming again. We see global pressure on constitutional democracy and core values such as freedom, equality, and autonomy. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is an attack on safety, peace, and democracy, a conflict between democracy and tyranny. No one has the right to destroy another country. Putin opened a door in Europe that we thought we had closed after World War II.

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Very few people who can offer an eyewitness account of World War II are still among us, but today this dark period remains a moral benchmark. While there is still major interest in that war, its focus is changing. As global conflicts continue to abound, there is all the more reason to reconsider multiple perspectives on the conflict. Today, schools are asked to teach students more than knowledge. Learning to think and reflect and using these skills to be able to choose how to behave are just as valuable.

What can World War II teach us today? The rationale for remembering can be linked to stories like Roosje's. Her story teaches us that certain values and norms are the very foundation for our democratic constitutional state.

### **Who was Roosje Glaser?**

During a visit to Auschwitz in 2002, Paul Glaser discovered a suitcase with his family's name in one of the displays. This discovery was the beginning of a quest into the little-known life of his aunt, Roosje Glaser (1914-2000). The story he uncovered became his book *Dancing with the Enemy: My Family's Holocaust Secret* (Glaser, 2013), an exceptional and hard-to-believe story.

The book describes the life and survival of Jewish dance teacher Roosje Glaser. She was born in The Netherlands and grew up in Kleve, Germany, because her father was the temporary director of a local factory. During her childhood, she was often excluded because she was Jewish.

After returning to The Netherlands in 1930, she became the very successful owner of a dance studio. When The Netherlands was occupied by Germany in 1940, she tried to keep control of her life as much as possible. She refused to wear the Yellow Star of David and defied the anti-Jewish discriminatory measures. Roosje chose the path of resistance.

Roosje's first act of defiance was to remove the letter J [Jood] from her passport, which the authorities stamped on the documents of Jews after the Nazi takeover. She was betrayed first by her husband and once more by her ex-lover. After her arrest in 1942, she was sent to Camp Westerbork, a transit camp to concentration camps such as Auschwitz and Sobibor, which was known as "the gateway to Hell."

During the next three years, Roosje managed to survive seven concentration camps, including Auschwitz. She refused to become a victim, and time and again she took the initiative in order to survive. She was confronted by her own moral boundaries and dilemmas. She became the mistress of two SS officers, first of the sub-commander in Westerbork and then of her superior in Auschwitz. The latter allowed her to teach SS officers, who were bored in the evenings, to

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dance (hence the book's title, *Dancing with the Enemy*). Before she set out on this course of action, however, she suffered medical experiments that left her infertile. In January 1945, she was sent on a hellish death march in the freezing cold to Berlin. On the Swedish border, she was part of an exchange with German prisoners of war. She remained in Sweden until her death.

What makes people behave the way they do? This question has long been the focus of research in many fields of study. A person's individual character—a combination of what a person wants, feels, thinks, and experiences—is highly influenced by the environment and the time period in which they live. As circumstances become increasingly extreme and social coherence is put under pressure, human nature—visible in individual behavior—is put to the ultimate test.

Roosje Glaser's story is an example of this test. Under the ever more extreme circumstances of the German occupation, she was betrayed, as were so many other Dutch Jews. Why would you betray another person? Why would you join the resistance? Why would you decide to collaborate with the enemy? How far are you willing to go if your life is at stake? To what social and moral dilemmas do your choices lead?

*Why Do People Act the Way They Do? Roosje Glaser's War Story* is a series of lessons developed based on *Dancing with the Enemy*. Roosje Glaser's exceptional life can help today's youth reflect on difficult moral questions. We want to challenge students to think critically about the choices people made during World War II, and about the dilemmas they themselves face today.

In close collaboration with classroom teachers, at the request of the Roosje Glaser Foundation, a project team consisting of a history teacher trainer, a curriculum expert, and a deputy school director developed the lesson materials. The lessons present an unconventional approach to teaching about World War II. The lessons challenge young people to think about the choices they may face in their own lives. Aunt Roosje, a vivacious, modern, young Jewish woman, serves as a model for ageless existential dilemmas.

How do you deal with friends and foes? Do you welcome fugitives or would you want them to move on? Do we still care about others, or do we feel people are responsible for their own lives? Do we still stand up for human dignity or does a general indifference prevail? This means thinking carefully about the world then and now and asking yourself: "What would I do if someone appealed to me for help?"

Paul Glaser based Aunt Roosje's story on her diaries, notes, letters, photographs, and witness statements, and his conversations with her just before she passed away in Stockholm in 2000.

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This material is available and well documented in the format of documents, diaries, photographs, and film. A collection of these materials—including, for example, a cinema news film from 1942 in which Roosje demonstrates a new dance—is available in Dutch, English, and German on the website of the Roosje Glaser Foundation ([www.roosjefoundation.org](http://www.roosjefoundation.org)).

**Why Do People Act the Way They Do? Roosje Glaser’s War Story**

The online lessons have been developed for three grade levels (the upper years of primary education, ages 10-12; the junior years of secondary education, ages 12-15; and the senior years of secondary education, ages 15-18). They are intended for the social studies classroom and offer an excellent introduction to Roosje’s true story. They include authentic audio and visual materials.

**Figure 1**

*Overview of the lessons for primary education*

<b>Lesson</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Theme</b>
<b>1: 1940-1945   World War II</b>	Why were The Netherlands occupied in 1940?	<b><i>Occupation and Liberation</i></b>
<b>2: 1914-1930   Roosje’s Youth in Kleve (Germany)</b>	What happened in Roosje’s youth?	<b><i>Bullying and Exclusion</i></b>
<b>3: 1930-1940   1940-1942   Resistance and Betrayal</b>	How did Roosje resist the anti-Jewish measures?	<b><i>Resistance and Betrayal</i></b>
<b>4: 1942   Hiding and Betrayal</b>	Why did Roosje have to go into hiding?	<b><i>Hiding and Betrayal</i></b>

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<b>5: 1942   About Life and Survival in Camp Westerbork</b>	What was life like in Westerbork and how could you survive there?	<b><i>Living and Survival</i></b>
<b>6: 1943-1945   Dancing with Germans in Auschwitz</b>	What choices did Roosje make in order to survive?	<b><i>Dancing with the Enemy</i></b>

In managing to survive horrors while “dancing with the enemy,” Roosje’s story connects well to new approaches to the teaching of remembrance and commemoration and serves as an outstanding resource for teaching about citizenship. An important aspect of developing citizenship is the development of values. At the core of citizenship education is the question: What is needed to co-exist in a constitutional state based on democratic principles, and how do we keep these core values alive as a shared responsibility (Hooghoff, 2008)?

The lessons raise student awareness of World War II, what happens when freedom and human dignity are suppressed, and the importance of democratic values in today’s society. Students learn to consider moral dilemmas and place Roosje’s choices in a historical context. They learn to recognize themes such as exclusion, discrimination, and freedom as experienced by today’s refugees and immigrants (Peschar et al., 2010).

In each lesson, students are faced with dilemmas and choices experienced by the characters. They learn to be respectful of each other, listen to different opinions, and come to realize the importance of democratic values while working together, doing research, and developing a personal perspective.

The lessons have a continuing thematic framework focused on occupation, freedom, exclusion, resistance, hiding, betrayal, and survival. Each lesson starts with a reading text (including audio-visual material) for the teacher in order to provide additional information with which to help students acquire a basic knowledge of the historical context and the lesson’s theme. The lessons are interactive, include photographs and films, and encourage students to find answers, exchange points of view, and reach a conclusion individually, in a group, or as a class. Especially when moral dilemmas are involved (see Appendix: Sample Lessons), the lessons emphasize that

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there is no single correct answer. Students are encouraged to think about their personal values and understand that points of views from the past have to be understood in their historical context without condemning them (Schuitema et al., 2018).

All lessons, which can also be taught thematically, have a similar structure: The teacher starts with a reading text based on Aunt Roosje's story; the teacher instructs the students for class or group assignments; the teacher asks questions and joins the students in their search for answers; the teacher stimulates the students to empathize and develop a personal perspective.

All student assignments are presented in a PowerPoint. In the role of a passionate storyteller who fascinates and challenges, the teacher actively guides the students through Roosje's history. This requires that the teacher has the ability to tell a story, which is an effective way to keep students interested and involved (Karlsen & Häggström, 2020). The final assignment in the series is intended for feedback and reflection and may consist of an exhibit on Roosje, writing an essay, organizing a debate with parents about Roosje's choices or the exclusion of foreigners, a play about going into hiding, or a graphic novel.

### **Teachers' Experiences**

In order to reach a wide audience, Paul Glaser has presented many lectures on his aunt to teachers and students. He has shared authentic materials, even including a small piece of barbed wire from Auschwitz. Particularly impressive have been the stories of his personal meetings with Aunt Roosje and information beyond the book that he has added in his lectures. His lectures have convinced many teachers in The Netherlands that Roosje's story offers an excellent way to investigate the past. The questions raised in the lessons are timeless. While they do not specifically address war violence, they encourage students to think about what is right and wrong under extreme circumstances.

Based on classroom observations and written comments by teachers who have taught the lessons, we believe that each of the six lessons is developmentally appropriate and easy to access on the Foundation's website. In addition, the lesson developers interviewed three experienced teachers about how these lessons differ from the usual approaches to teaching about World War II (Holthuis, Hooghoff, & Nijmeijer, 2021). The teachers especially appreciated the value the lessons added through a personal and narrative approach, an emphasis on standing up for freedom and human dignity, and the incentive for students to develop a personal perspective. Other positive aspects they identified were the thematic structure of the lessons, the clear lesson goals, the similar layout across the lessons, and the clear PowerPoints for the students with

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questions, assignments, and photos. The teachers also thought the timeline of Roosje's life was very useful. They liked that they were able to add more background information and adapt each lesson to discuss Roosje's various dilemmas without having to go into too much detail about what actually happened.

After having read the book, one of the teachers decided to test her ability to tell a compelling story. It became a fascinating storytelling experience in six parts that the students in her class looked forward to with excitement. In her lesson story, she included questions and assignments and ended each lesson with a cliffhanger. In summary, she stated, "By the power of the story, Roosje was almost physically present in class for six weeks."

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Appendix

Sample Lessons

**FROM LESSON 5**

**1942-1943 | About Life and Survival in Camp Westerbork**

**Summary**

After their arrest, Roosje and her mother are taken to Camp Westerbork. The Jews are led to believe that they will be sent to labor camps in Eastern Europe. People are in permanent fear of being deported. Roosje immediately understands that she has to become useful in order to avoid deportation. She befriends a Dutch officer who is serving in the German army. She can work as a secretary and does everything to avoid ending up on a deportation list.

**Assignment 3. How does Roosje survive?**

**The teacher tells the story:**

Roosje and her mother have to find a way to survive in this new environment. Roosje knows she has to make herself useful in order to avoid deportation to the East. Roosje and her mother are punished for not reporting to Westerbork voluntarily. This means they will end up on the deportation list soon. Roosje manages to get a job as a nurse so she can stay with her sick mother in Westerbork.

**Reading text for students. The questions are answered individually or in pairs.**

***October/November 1942 – Roosje in the Schreibstube (administration)***

*It might seem impossible, but I managed to get a fantastic job. I've become the secretary to the highest ranking officer in the Sicherheitsdienst (Security Service). He is a very young man and we work together all day long. The other inmates are madly jealous of me, yet they still chase me politely the entire day with a hundred-and-one requests. Imagine, I sit behind a desk with a really nice young gentleman opposite me wearing a large swastika. And he's very kind to me. As a result of the job I'm allowed to stay here on a permanent basis and can also keep my father and mother here.*

Paul Glaser, *Dancing with the Enemy*, p. 115.

Explain whether you ...

- *can/cannot understand that Roosje becomes the secretary for the highest ranking officer in the Sicherheitsdienst.*
- *can/cannot understand the other inmates' responses.*

**FROM LESSON 6**

**1943-1944 | Dancing with the Enemy | About Life and Survival in Auschwitz**

Roosje arrives in Auschwitz-Birkenau, a big complex in Poland, both an extermination and a labor camp, on September 16, 1943. She survives the gruesome circumstances by dancing with the enemy. Roosje is there until December 1944. Then the death march begins.

**How does Roosje survive?**

**Dancing with the Enemy: The Dancer of Auschwitz**

**Text to read to students:**

*During one of our "planning discussions" I learned that the SS-officers met regularly in the evenings to pass the time. After all, they too were stuck in a camp far from home. The nights involved drinking and singing, but after a while that became a bit routine. One day I took the plunge and offered to play the piano and dance during their evening get-togethers. I knew a lot of German songs. Kurt [the SS-officer Roosje got involved with] responded evasively, but after a few days I was told I should come along one of the evenings. (...) Prison uniforms weren't exactly appropriate, so he arranged for me to have different clothes and more elegant shoes. (...)*

*So there I was, spending an evening with the SS. (...) I was expected to dance to the music from the gramophone. I took a moment to decide what record to put on, then Kurt raised his hand. Silence fell as I introduced myself and the dance I was about to perform. It was a mazurka. First slow, then faster. I demonstrated three different dances, and after half an hour it was over. No one clapped but I was given a whole loaf of bread as a reward and was sent back to my barrack.*

Paul Glaser, *Dancing with the Enemy*, pp. 178, 179, 180

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**Assignment 3. Statement/Discussion.**

**Rosje has to dance with the enemy in order to survive.**

Students write down their own arguments and then have a group discussion. Being right is not the issue, but listening to each other's opinions is important.

- *I can fully understand this because .....*
- *I cannot understand this because .....*
- *I could never have done this because...*
- *I could have done this as well because....*

**FROM LESSON 4**

**1942 | Hiding and Betrayal**

**Reading text for students**

**Assignment**

On August 26, 1942, Rosje, her mother, and her brother are told to travel to Westerbork. The only thing they can do is to go into hiding. Rosje knows how difficult it is to find a hiding address. Jews are often betrayed. Rosje arranges false identification papers for her mother and herself. Kees van Meteren knows a hiding address in Naarden. It is a boarding house led by a member of the Nationaal Socialistische Bond [National Socialist League], Henk Coljee, who sympathizes with the Germans, and his German wife Magda. Rosje does not mention her Jewish background. They are hiding with the enemy!

***Was Rosje clever or not to hide in plain sight with the Coljee family? Can you explain why/why not?***

***Rosje arranges false identification papers for her mother and herself. What do you think was false in these papers?***

***Why do you think the Jews who went into hiding were betrayed during the occupation? And by whom were they betrayed?***

***Do people today betray each other? Why would they do this? Do you think you could betray someone?***

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