




June 2009

Differing Voices: Stories of the Holocaust from Various Perspectives A Lesson Plan and Personal Memorial

Lauren Seghi
Highcrest Middle School

Follow this and additional works at: https://thekeep.eiu.edu/the_councilor

 Part of the Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Educational Methods Commons, Elementary Education Commons, Elementary Education and Teaching Commons, Junior High, Intermediate, Middle School Education and Teaching Commons, and the Pre-Elementary, Early Childhood, Kindergarten Teacher Education Commons

Illinois Council of Social Studies

Recommended Citation

Seghi, Lauren (2009) "Differing Voices: Stories of the Holocaust from Various Perspectives A Lesson Plan and Personal Memorial," *The Councilor: A Journal of the Social Studies*: Vol. 70: No. 2, Article 2. Available at: https://thekeep.eiu.edu/the_councilor/vol70/iss2/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Councilor: A Journal of the Social Studies by an authorized editor of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.

Illinois Council of Social Studies

The Councilor

Differing Voices: Stories of the Holocaust from Various Perspectives A Lesson Plan and Personal Memorial

By Lauren Seghi

Highcrest Middle School, Wilmette, Illinois

I cannot remember the first time I read about the Battle of Gettysburg or recited the first 40 Presidents in order, but I know for a fact that I have had a great passion for history ever since I was a child living in Virginia. My fascination with the past grew every chance I was given to visit monuments, memorials and battlefields throughout the south. I still enjoy reading about history and watching historical documentaries and so it was no surprise that I fulfilled my dream to become a history teacher by studying at Illinois State University. I wish that my students would have as much enthusiasm about learning as I do when they leave my classroom. In addition, I hope to help my students gain a greater understanding of the relationship between the past and the present and how much history has shaped our lives today.

My grandfather is a Holocaust survivor. He is 81 years old and not, in fact, Jewish, but Roman Catholic. Although I have always had an interest in history, I never felt comfortable asking him questions about his life in Europe. That is until I took a US History class at ISU in the spring of 2006. That particular semester, I was given the opportunity in an assignment to interview a family member who lived through a major event in history, local or worldwide. Needless to say, my grandfather's name was the first to enter my mind and I was thrilled when he agreed to help me complete the assignment. The interview took place on Easter, March 2006, and I listened for three hours as my grandfather told me about his childhood in Poland and how he felt when the Germans invaded his homeland at the age of 11 in September of 1939. I taped his stories for a family memento and spent another three hours transcribing the interview into written form for use in my paper for history class. In the paper, I compared the plight of immigrants from the early 1900s to those who came to America the same time as my grandfather in the 1950s. Overall, I found both similarities and differences in, among other things, the reasons for leaving, the conditions of their trips across the ocean, and the assimilation process.

In the fall of 2006, I took a Holocaust class where we discussed everything from the origins of the Final Solution to Hitler's suicide at the conclusion of World War II. One day in class, we gave presentations on Holocaust commemoration in countries around the world and my professor shared with the class the debate that arose at Auschwitz in 1998 when Polish nationalists attempted to place crosses outside of the camp in honor of members of the Resistance held there during the war. Jews were unhappy about such a memorial, and as a result, the crosses were removed. At this moment in class, I recalled the interview and stories of my grandfather's suffering and was bothered by the fact there was so often a singular story told of the Holocaust in memoirs, history books and

classrooms: the Jewish plight. I shared my frustration with my mentor, a historian, and he was astounded by the information I had learned and how precious my grandfather's story was after listening to the interview himself one afternoon. He inspired me to share my grandfather's story in future classrooms or at a conference. From that moment on, I felt it was my goal to have my grandfather's story heard by those other than on a college campus.

When creating lessons, I always try to tie the main ideas around one or multiple sources, allowing students to see history as an ever-changing discipline. I also continually emphasize historical empathy in my lessons by using a great deal of multimedia, including film, music, speeches, slide shows and images. Although I have never officially used "Differing Voices" in a classroom, I have shared the story of my grandfather on various occasions. In the spring of 2007, I taught a "micro lesson" comparing both the Jewish and Polish suffering during the Holocaust using the interview as a major focus. I opened with the photo analysis of the Polish cleric used in "Differing Voices" and played my grandfather's interview for my classmates to listen. I ran into a challenge, however, when I introduced the assessment where "my students" had to place the events of my grandfather's life with major world events on a timeline. I opened the eyes of "my students" to various perspectives of the Holocaust but as a teacher, I found the assignment to be overly simplistic for even a middle school classroom.

While student teaching the following year in the spring of 2008, I taught two units of 8th grade US History: the Great Depression and World War II. In US History textbooks, the Holocaust is often briefly mentioned and taught at the end of the unit. However, my cooperating teacher allowed me to focus on whatever subjects I would like within the units I taught and yet again, I chose to use my grandfather's life to share a little known story of suffering and despair. Unfortunately, I did not plan the unit wisely and only had one day to teach the Holocaust. The students responded well to my personal touch, sharing stories of their own relatives and enjoyed reading about the lives of children of the Holocaust (Anne Frank and my grandfather, Stanley Peszek) who wrote their thoughts around the same age as the 8th graders. Still, with little to no previous background on the Holocaust, I do not think I was able to share the overwhelming significance of such an event on the course of world history.

In creating "Differing Voices," I tried to balance basic statistics and facts of the Holocaust with a controversial debate and a personal story thrown into the background. This lesson would fit best taught in a World History class in the middle of a Holocaust unit of roughly seven to ten days. Before sharing the different perspectives, I would have already shared with the students the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party, the Final Solution and Nazi anti-Jewish policies. If this lesson was placed within a sort unit of three days which may be found in a US History class, I would use it on the second day. By using the excerpts of memoirs, this would also be a very valuable lesson to use in a Literature class. It is imperative to help students understand that we would not know half the information we know about the lives of famous historical figures such as Bartolomeo Las Casas or Abraham Lincoln without their writings. It would be so fulfilling to share with

the students the memoirs of Anne Frank, Lala Fishman, and Stanley Peszek and then ask the class to write their own thoughts on a particular subject like war or politics or how they felt during a very important moment in their own lives.

From the very beginning, my goal in sharing my grandfather's story was to bring my personal touch to a lesson that in turn would inspire my students to ask questions about the writing of history and attempt to understand why some stories have been ignored. Furthermore, I hope my students would want to find out more about their family history and to research what major events of which their relatives may have been a part. I, for one, am very proud of my own family history and in the end, want my students to be as well.

Lesson Introduction: The students will come to understand that the racism and discrimination of the Nazis extended past the Jewish population during the Holocaust. In fact, they will learn that it affected groups such as Polish Catholics, prisoners of war, and the handicapped as well. This will be done by the analysis of photographs, maps and graphs as well as the students' reading and discussion of Holocaust memoirs written by three separate individuals with different backgrounds. This is an important lesson because the Holocaust is one of the greatest examples of the violation of human rights in our history and should never be forgotten. In addition, our awareness of the Holocaust in today's society comes from a predominantly Jewish perspective. Memoirs like that of Anne Frank's diary lie deep in our psyche and the Holocaust is considered to be a great tragedy. It is crucial, however, to acknowledge the fact that only half of the victims of the Holocaust were Jewish.

The experience of my grandfather, Stanley Peszek, was only one of those stories. My grandfather is a Roman Catholic Holocaust survivor whose childhood was interrupted at the age of 11 when Poland was invaded by neighboring Germany. Within a matter of months, he was split up from his family and taken to a juvenile labor camp, forced to dig trenches for the Germans. Although he did not have much to eat or a warm place to sleep, he told me once that he survived by having a strong determination and faith to live. I first heard his story as a sophomore in college after being too scared to ask him any questions. After opening up so freely to me, he now shares his memories without my even asking him. I hope this lesson inspires other educators to teach their students those untold stories of history and encourage their students to ask questions about their family background. History is so often looked upon as boring by those who had to sit through lectures and Power Point presentations. However, this lesson allows students to see history as a complex, ever-changing discipline. By analyzing maps and graphs and reading the stories of Holocaust survivors, the students will be able to grasp the extent of the Nazi's hatred, racism and discrimination on the entire European population.

Lesson Objectives:

Understands and appreciates the extent of the Nazi persecution upon multiple groups of people. The student will be able to:

- identify three major European populations affected by Nazi policies and discrimination.
- analyze and identify the country with the majority of the concentration and death camps.
- understand and explain the conflict between the Jewish and Polish commemorations of the Holocaust.

Understands and appreciates the importance of oral history in shaping society's recollection of the past. The student will be able to:

- compare and contrast three different perspectives of the Holocaust by answering questions analyzing memoirs.

Illinois State Learning Standards:

- 16A. Apply the skills of historical analysis and interpretation
 - 16.A.3b-Make inferences about historical events and eras using historical maps and other historical sources.
 - 16.A.4b-Compare competing interpretations of an event.
- 16D. Understand Illinois, United States and world social history
 - 16.D.3 (W)-Identify the origins and analyze consequences of events that have shaped world social history including famines, migrations, plagues, slave trading.

Connections to Past and Future Lessons

This lesson would come in the middle of a unit on the Holocaust after discussion of the election of Hitler and origins of Nazi policy. In examining the Holocaust, I believe it is imperative to discuss and analyze the stories of all of those affected in order to show the all-encompassing impact this event had on European society at the time. The Jewish perspective of the Holocaust has dominated the scholarship following this horrific event, and one can argue that the introduction of different perspectives, including that of a Roman Catholic survivor, will open up the eyes of the students. Overall, it is imperative for the students to understand that no one's story in history should be ignored or overlooked. In addition, the students will be able to analyze photographs, maps and graphs and read and discuss three separate excerpts from Holocaust memoirs.

Lesson Structure

A. Opening the Lesson

1. Students will be asked to analyze the photo of a Polish cleric questioned by two members of the SD on the street taken in the 1930s or 40s (Rossino, 2005). In a "think-pair-share" activity, the students will first work independently to come up with the region/location, time period of the photo, and three adjectives they would use to describe the lives of the people at the time from when the picture took place. The students will then pair up and share their answers. After two minutes, we will discuss their answers as a class. (**set induction**)

2. Explain the purpose of today's class is to understand the extent of Nazi persecution on the entire European population and to recognize the significance of memoirs in learning even more about the Holocaust.

B. Developing the Lesson

1. Analyze and discuss graphs and maps showing the statistics of deaths of the Holocaust by country, ethnic group and locations of concentration and death camps. The purpose of analyzing these graphs is to help the students compare and contrast the amount of deaths among various ethnic groups and to understand that the Holocaust was not just a Jewish tragedy. The map shows clearly that the most death and concentration camps were in Poland, leading the reader to assume that they were built to eradicate more than just the Jewish population.

2. Hand out excerpt from the "War of the Crosses" article (2005) and ask students to take five minutes to read it individually. "The War of the Crosses" debate between Jews and Poles escalated in 1998 when Polish nationalists pushed to erect 152 Christian crosses in honor of the Polish Catholic resistance fighters who were killed at Auschwitz behind Block 11. The Jewish population was not happy as they considered Auschwitz a Jewish graveyard and still held a deep resentment of the fact that many Poles collaborated with the Nazis during World War II and helped lead pogroms after the war ended. After the five minutes, we will discuss the article as a class where I will ask the students to react and respond to both the Polish and Jewish perspectives in commemorating the Holocaust.

3. Briefly introduce the importance of memoirs in history. Memoirs allow future generations to read and understand historical events from varying perspectives. In the past, writing without the access of a computer or the internet was the only way people could express their feelings and communicate with the outside world. Many of the stories written about during the Holocaust are disturbing and hard to grasp but we would not know what happened during this time without first-hand accounts. Hand out three separate memoirs (Frank, A., Peszek, S. and Fishman, L., 1993, 2006, 1997) and a list of comprehension questions to students randomly. Give them five minutes to read their memoir silently and answer the questions. Put the students in groups of three and have them share their answers to the questions with their group members. After five minutes, we will come back together as an entire class and engage in a discussion about the day's lesson.

Time Allotments

One to two 45 minute class periods

Accommodations

Students who are hearing or vision impaired will be placed near the front of the room. Students who are mainstreamed will be given only 6 of the 12 questions assigned modified by the classroom teacher or aide.

Student Assessment Procedures

The students will read and discuss the three memoirs in groups and analyze the memoirs by answering a list of 12 questions. As a class, we will discuss the memoirs to conclude the lesson. Every member of the group needs to write down their answers but only one group member should share the answers.

References

Polish cleric photo:

Rossino, A.B. (2005) *Hitler Strikes Poland: Blitzkrieg, Ideology, and Atrocity*. Kansas: University Press of Kansas.

Map and graphs:

No author. Retrieved from <http://www.historyplace.com/worldwar2/holocaust/h-statistics.htm>

No author. Retrieved from <http://www.holocaustchronicle.org/holocaustappendices.html>

No author. Retrieved from <http://history1900s.about.com/library/holocaust/nmap2.htm>
author unknown. (2005). *War of the Crosses*. Retrieved from <http://www.scrapbookpages.com/Poland/Crosses/Crosses.html>

Memoirs:

Fishman, L & Weingartner, S. (1997) *Lala's Story: a Memoir of the Holocaust*. Illinois: Northwestern University Press.

Frank, A. (1993). *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*. Bantam.

Seghi, L. & Peszek, S. (March 16, 2006).

Name _____

Period ___ Date _____

Voices of the Holocaust

Directions: After reading the excerpts of one of the three memoirs (Anne Frank, Lala Fishman or Stanley Peszek) you received, answer the questions below *in complete sentences*. (12 points)

1. How old is the author?

2. Where does the author live? How do you know?

3. Who do you think the author is writing to? For?

4. How does the author overcome his/her struggles? Do they at all? How do you know?

5. What can you learn about the Holocaust based on this person's experiences? List three (3) ideas.

6. List one (1) question you have for the author.

****Print this handout back-to-back****

Voices of the Holocaust group discussion

Directions: After answering the questions individually, share your thoughts with your group members. Answer the questions in *complete sentences*.

1. What are the ages of the authors? Were there any clues in the narratives that gave this away?

2. Where do the authors live? Were there any clues in the narratives that gave this away?

3. How are the experiences of the authors similar and different? Give two (2) examples for both.

4. How do the authors overcome their struggles? Do they at all?

5. In your group, share one (1) thing you learned about the Holocaust based on these narratives.

6. In your group, share one (1) thing you learned about the importance of memoirs and the writing of history.
