

## Every Artifact Has a Story

Ruth Kramer

Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education, Yeshiva University

**Grade:** 7th and up

**Time frame and subject:** 3 45-minute classes within a longer Holocaust unit in Jewish history, humanities, or Language Arts.

**Objective:** To teach the importance of learning about individuals who went through the Holocaust by teaching about their artifacts.

**Rationale:** There is much to learn from something so tangible! Students will be able to create their own stories or deepen their ideas and understandings through these artifacts.

Teaching the Holocaust is a very difficult but rewarding experience. There are many different angles from which this subject can be approached. Whether it is from the perspective of the Jews, perpetrators, bystanders, or rescuers, each angle leads to its own understanding. Something which few people think about but that is extremely valuable are the artifacts that emerge from the time period. Although 6 million Jews died, countless objects are left for us to examine. What were the experiences that those objects went through during the Holocaust? What are their stories? These questions can evoke extremely inspiring and meaningful discussions for students during a Holocaust course.

To begin a lesson on artifacts, ask the students for a definition and some examples of Holocaust artifacts they have seen. What size does an object need to be to be called an artifact? Can a house, for example, be an artifact? Can a spoon? A mezuzah? A sweater?

Distribute the short story “The Watch” by Elie Wiesel (in K. Shawn & K. Goldfrad, Eds., *The Call of Memory: Learning About the Holocaust Through Narrative*, 2008, pp. 220–224. Teaneck, NJ: Ben Yehuda Press) and ask students to read silently and/or aloud, as you prefer. If time is short, tell them the plot and read this paragraph aloud:

“I touch it, I caress it. What I feel, besides compassion, is a strange kind of gratitude. You see, the men I had believed to be immortal had vanished into fiery clouds. My teachers, my friends, my guides had all deserted me. While this thing, this nameless, lifeless thing had survived for the sole purpose of welcoming me on my return and providing an epilogue to my childhood. And there awakens in me a desire to confide in it, to tell it my adventures, and in exchange, listen to its own. What had happened in my absence: who had first taken possession of my house, my bed? Or rather, no; our confidences could wait for another time, another place:

Paris, New York, Jerusalem. But first I would entrust it to the best jeweler in the world, so that the watch might recover its luster, its memory of the past.”

Discuss as time allows. Questions may include:

- Why did Wiesel feel “gratitude” towards the watch?
- How can an object “welcome” its owner? Share this feeling about something you own.
- Wiesel wants “to confide in it, to tell it my adventures.” Can you share an anecdote about feeling the same with an object you own or owned?
- In what way can an object have “its memory of the past”?

Following this discussion, play this 8-minute “Footprints” video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWneASsotkc>), in which curator Paul Salmons creates a story around an artifact that was found. He is holding a shoe and he tells a story that was likely to have taken place through this object. Ask: In what ways has this film deepened your connection to and understanding of artifacts?

### **Homework:**

Assign the short story “Inside the Sewing Machine Drawer” by Jennifer Robertson in the Spring 2014 issue of *PRISM: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Holocaust Educators*, pp. 4–7.

For the next day’s activity, set up 3 (or 4) stations with instructions, below, at each. In the front of your room, have enough photos of artifacts so that each student will be able to choose at least one. Choose artifacts from the front, back, and inside covers of the Spring 2014 issue of *PRISM* or from pp. 14 and 16–19 in that issue. You may also choose photos at [http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media\\_list.php?MediaType=AF](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media_list.php?MediaType=AF).

Read aloud, or have students read, Nancy Patz’s essay “About the Artifacts” on p. 15 in the same issue.

Then, direct students to choose one of these pictures and then go on to a station of their choice. The station options are Story-telling, Poetry, or Video-making (or Art workshop if no computers are available or as a 4th alternative). If your school has iPads or laptops, then each student should get one. If not, then the students in the Story-telling and Poetry groups will use their notebooks.

- Story-telling – Write a story about the object. What did it go through in the Holocaust? You may tell a story through the eyes of the owner or the “eyes” of the artifact, and your story must be based on accurate, authentic historical content. Include the date, location, and what was happening around the artifact at the time of your story.

- Poetry – Using your choice of poetic form, describe how the artifact must have felt as it endured the Holocaust. Here are 3 examples of poetry formats you might like.
  - Cinquain Poem - <http://www.hhs.helena.k12.mt.us/ILAP/CinquainPage.htm>
  - Haiku Poem - <http://www.hhs.helena.k12.mt.us/ILAP/HaikuPage.htm>
  - Acrostic Poem - <http://www.hhs.helena.k12.mt.us/ILAP/AcrosticPoemPage.htm>
- Video-making – Using Animoto, iMovie, Google Images, or any other resource you choose, create a video showing what the artifact must have gone through. Include subtitles on each page explaining what you are trying to show. This station can only work if enough laptops or iPads are available.
- Art workshop—an alternative to the video-making station. Express the story of your artifact through art.

Students will have this period to complete this project. If a student finishes early, he may go to another station and work with someone there or begin a different mode of expressing the importance of his artifact.

### **Conclusion/ Summative Assessment:**

On day 3, students will share their projects and explain what they have learned through doing them.

Exit card or homework: Answer these questions:

- Why does paying attention to these artifacts help one to develop compassion?
- Think about how much you own and care about, and how much the Jews in Nazi occupied Europe must have owned and cherished. Where might all of their artifacts be today? What can you conclude about the trauma the Jews suffered?
- How did reading “The Watch,” “Inside the Sewing Machine Drawer,” and “About the Artifacts” and seeing “Footprints” help you to zero in on, learn about, and create stories, poetry, or art about the artifact you chose to examine?