

Artifacts: Giving Prisoners the Strength to Survive

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Subject: English/Language arts, humanities, or Jewish history class

Grade level: 8th-10th grade

Time required: One double class period

Objective:

(1) Students will read four short testimonies of Holocaust survivors who describe why certain objects were of importance to them during that time.

(2) Students will then describe the significance of these artifacts in helping them to learn how Jews found the strength to survive.

Hook (Anticipatory Set):

Ask any 5 students who are wearing a watch, ring, bracelet, or necklace to take it off and hold it up to the class. Ask them to explain its origins, including who gave it to them, when, and why; and the meaning it has for them when they wear it.

Materials:

Introduction; four short testimonies

Input/ Modeling:

I wrote an introductory list of five ways that an artifact might have helped to give a Jewish prisoner strength and a reason to live. Give each student this list and discuss them with the class before they split into groups. Ask students to look for these examples in the testimonies they read and to describe and analyze the artifacts and their uses to their owners.

Input/Independent Practice:

Students will read four short testimonies (see Goucher website for 1, 2, and 4):

- (1) “The Ring” by Alex Brook
- (2) “Flowers in the Ghetto” by Myra Herbst Genn
- (3) “*Tefillin* in Hell” about Eliyahu Herman (attached)
- (4) “A Few Days after Liberation...” by Alex Brook

Divide the class into four groups, with each reading a different testimony. Students will identify the artifact described, answer worksheet questions, and begin a discussion. After 15 minutes, the groups will rotate, until all four testimonies are read and discussed.

Checking for Understanding: By walking around the groups and listening in on the discussions, I can see who is on the right track and guide those who may not be. Students also fill out a short questionnaire for me to grade later.

Closure: To conclude, the four groups will reunite as a class to share their answers, ideas, and opinions. To some extent this will be a *check for understanding*, but it will also reveal creative thinking among students and help them reflect on and clarify their feelings on this sensitive topic.

Extended Learning or research project: Students can read the additional texts noted, below, and uncover more examples of artifacts and the ways in which they were used to sustain the Jews during the Holocaust.

Introductory List for Students

How did certain *artifacts* give Jewish prisoners the strength to live in ghettos, on the run, in the forests, in hiding, and in concentration camps? We learn from various testimonies that certain objects took on special meaning:

(1) **Ritual:** The person finds comfort and security in interacting with the object on a regular basis. It brings familiarity, routine, reassurance, and meaning into one's existence. For example, in Uri Orlev's fictionalized account of his ghetto experience, *The Island on Bird Street* (HMH Books for Young Readers, 1992), he tells about his reliance on the book *Robinson Crusoe*, a classic given to him by his father. Other such objects might include a spoon, a photo, or a small toy.

(2) **Privileged Possession:** The object (regardless of value) is something to hold onto, as your own, at a time when all the things you previously owned have been confiscated. Sometimes, to maintain the privilege of any possession, it was necessary for a Jew to hide it and keep it secret. A few survivors were able to keep a treasured family photo in their shoe or a small piece of jewelry in the seam of a tattered piece of clothing. In her award-winning autobiography *All But My Life: A Memoir* (Hill and Wang, 1995) survivor Gerda Weissman Klein talks about the importance of ski shoes that she believes helped to keep her alive.

(3) **Protective Powers:** The person acquired an object of intrinsic value and may believe he has merited this source of protection for himself. This may be because the object is a religious or sacred one that is sure to please G-d, such as *tefillin* or a *siddur*. Perhaps the object has been blessed in some way or was a gift from someone special. The object may be perceived to bring the owner luck or even to be responsible for keeping the owner alive, as you can see in the following illustration.

Shmuel Stern (later Stanley) was born in Nelipeno, Carpathia (Czech)/Horsfalva (Hungary), and deported to the Buchenwald concentration camp on December 8, 1944. Stern obtained one of his *tefillin* from a Roma inmate in January 1945 in trade for a precious sweater. The other, he rescued from a burning heap of religious articles. He put the *tefillin* in his pocket and later hid it under a mattress. Risking his life by holding on to a personal possession, he would put on the *tefillin* every morning and recite his prayers. Stern shared the *tefillin* with his fellow inmates who would line up near his bed each morning to borrow the *tefillin* and recite prayers. He was sent to the Magdeburg camp in March 1945 and liberated in April.

http://collection.mjhnyc.org/index.php?g=detail&object_id=5692

Discover more about this artifact and other stories from the USHMM collection in:

To Life: 36 Stories of Memory and Hope. See also

http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media_da.php?ModuleId=10005143&MediaId=1653.

(4) **Hope:** The object has no intrinsic value, but it is perceived to have value as it becomes imbued with personal meaning. Like the idea of protective powers, above, it grants some sort of promise to its owner as a symbol of a desired reality or positive

outcome. Its value is symbolic rather than tangible. A button or a bird's feather are examples of this kind of artifact. The owner may have used her imagination or wishful thinking; either way, this object becomes a symbol of hope for the future. The book *Four Perfect Pebbles: A Holocaust Story* (Lila Perl & Marion Blumen, Greenwillow Books, 1999) illustrates this in the following quote:

“If she could find four perfect pebbles of almost exactly the same size and shape, it meant that her family would remain whole. Mama and Papa and she and Albert would survive Bergen-Belsen. The four of them might even survive the Nazis’ attempt to destroy every last Jew in Europe.” (Note: Looking for pebbles was “only a game” for Marion. But as it turns out, all four of the family—Marion, her brother, and both parents—do survive!)

(5) Buying time: The object assists the person to focus on the progression of time. The object somehow connects a person's past to his/her future. A vision of his life before the war began becomes linked to a vision of life when the war will be over one day. In more dire situations, it can simply connect one minute to the next, today to tomorrow, or even this world to the next world. Such artifacts may include a watch, as in Elie Wiesel's short story “The Watch” (see website); wedding clothes, as in the Rachmil Bryks short story “In a Cupboard in the Ghetto” (in *The Call of Memory: Learning About the Holocaust Through Narrative: An Anthology*; K. Shawn & K. Goldfrad, Eds; 2008); a calendar, or a tiny carving tool with which one could note the days.

Instructions for Students:

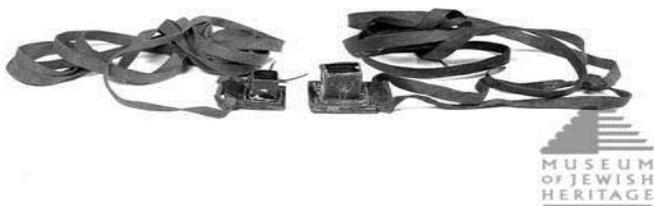
For you to do in your group:

--Read about an artifact in the testimony you received in your group. By the end of class, you will have read all four testimonies.

--Discuss the testimony and the artifact. Then, respond to the following questions as a group and be prepared to share your thoughts with the class:

- a) What is the artifact?
- b) What is the setting of the testimony?
- c) Who owned the artifact?
- d) How did the writer get it?
- e) How did this artifact help to sustain the survivor, according to the criteria listed above?

For the article on *tefillin*, excerpted from the article "*Tefillin in Hell*": *Tefillin* are ritual objects worn by religious Jews during weekday morning prayers.





Eliyahu with Lt. Rabbi Birnbaum

http://www.aish.com/ho/p/Tefillin_in_Hell.html

“I am sure it is in that merit that I was saved, and that I was able to keep my *tefillin* with me, even while in the hell of Mauthausen and Gunskirchen, two of the worst spots on the face of the earth.” - Eliyahu Herman

Before entering Mauthausen, Eliyahu hid his precious *tefillin* by carefully tying them to his leg. At the selection, someone whispered to him to lie about his age and profession. Eliyahu, a 15-year-old yeshiva student, told the camp commandant that he was a 28-year-old tailor. “I was sent to the right, to life, while the other boys my age were sent to the left, to death.” When sent to the shower, Eliyahu miraculously managed to hide his *tefillin* under a rock. “That was the last time I was ever separated from my *tefillin*. I kept them with me throughout the war, and afterwards. Today, I take them with me wherever I go.” He pointed to the small velvet bag lying on the counter.



The tefillin

“Dressed in nothing more than thin pajamas, we slept that night in the snow. It was our mattress, our blanket, and our food. Back home, a maid would polish my shoes. Now I had no shoes. Not far from us were what appeared to be five small huts. When I woke up, I was horrified to discover they were really five enormous piles of frozen corpses. There was no fuel to burn them.”

“The first morning in that hell, I donned my *tefillin* and begged God to take me. I could not stand the suffering. But although I was no better than the others, God wanted me to remain alive.”

Eliyahu remained alive, and continued to don his *tefillin* and recite a quick prayer each morning before setting out to work. He had to be careful—if the Nazis were to discover him with the *tefillin*, he would be immediately shot.

Eliyahu recalled the special Divine providence in hiding his *tefillin*: “Twice a day, at roll call, the SS soldiers would surround us and check us with their dogs. Although these dogs always stopped to smell my leg, the one where the *tefillin* were tied, the Nazis never discovered them. I can only describe it as a miracle. There is no other explanation.”

Eliyahu recalls his last day in the camp: “It was a Friday night. We were locked in our barrack, and had heard that the Germans placed explosives around it. They wanted to kill us and hide all the evidence. People were dying like flies, and I knew that if the Germans didn’t explode the barrack, I would die of hunger. I said to my friends, the Klein brothers, ‘If you’ll join me, let’s escape together.’ We began climbing over bodies to make our way toward the door.

“We somehow found the strength—don’t ask me how—to break the door open and escape that death-filled room. Of course I had my *tefillin* with me. Once we were in the forest, we threw off our lice-infested prison pajamas and put on SS uniforms that we had removed from dead soldiers.

“Suddenly, we heard the sound of a car traveling. When we saw it was an American jeep, we emerged from our hiding place and stood at the side of the road. Three soldiers jumped out of the jeep, their guns trained on us, and requested that we show them our documents. Documents? We didn’t even have clothes, let alone documents!”

“I didn’t have documents, so I showed the soldiers my *tefillin*. At first they thought it was a hand grenade! But then one of them recognized they were *tefillin*. He asked me, ‘*Du bist a Yid?*’ (Are you Jewish?)

“I started crying, and said, ‘You are the *Moshiach* (Messiah)!’ The soldier ordered me to recite a Jewish prayer. I said *Shema*. He immediately embraced me and started kissing me. When I told him that the two German soldiers standing next to me were also Jews, he hugged and kissed them, too.

Eliyahu was sent to a local field hospital. When he arrived there, he weighed 81 pounds and was running a very high fever. “I lost consciousness almost immediately after arriving at the hospital. I woke up to discover my *tefillin* under my head. I asked about the Jewish soldier who had saved my life, but no one could identify him. That was the last I heard of him for almost 70 years.”

Eliyahu turned to the media. “I phoned one of the more popular radio stations, hoping they’d publicize my story. After explaining my request, the man on the other end of the telephone said, ‘Everything you told me was broadcast throughout the country. Certainly one of our listeners will contact you with information.’”

None of the listeners contacted him, but a major Israeli newspaper did, and a large write-up about his quest appeared in their Friday edition. Saturday night, the phone rang in the Herman household, and when Eliyahu answered the phone, a stranger asked, “Are you the man who was in Gunskirchen 65 years ago?” Eliyahu replied in the affirmative.

“Do you remember what you said to that Jewish soldier?” the stranger asked. “I told him, ‘You’re the Moshiach.’”

A few days later, Eliyahu and Rabbi Meyer Birnbaum, a well-known scholar in Jerusalem and author of *Lieutenant Birnbaum*, met at Rabbi Birnbaum’s home in Jerusalem. Of course Eliyahu brought his *tefillin*. They are always with him.

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