

# Using Modern Objects, Photos, and Poetry to Connect to Historical Artifacts

Sury Weiss

Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education, Yeshiva University

**Grade level:** 8-12

**Content area:** Language Arts, social studies, history, humanities, art, or Jewish history

**Time Required:** 2 class periods.

## **Preparation:**

Bring to class an old (or old-looking) pair of eye glasses and an old or antique bracelet or necklace. I chose these objects because they are common objects that everyone has or knows someone who has, and both can be related to in our generation. One is an object of necessity; the other, a luxury. Each has the potential to represent and evoke varied memories.

Place each object on its own small table or desk in the middle, front, or back of the room in a location where there is enough room for students to walk around and view each object clearly from different angles.

## **Introduction:**

- Instruct students to enter the class in silence. Pose this question for them to consider: What makes something an artifact? (A tangible object that has a relation to a person, time period, or place.)
- Direct them to take a pen or pencil and a notebook, to walk to each of the two tables and examine carefully each of the two objects, and to take notes or draw their thoughts, feelings, and ideas silently as they examine the objects or after they have completed their observations.
- After students have completed this task, direct them to take a seat and begin a journal entry, writing as if they were the owner of one of these two items. Identify who they are as the owners, where they live, what these items aid them in, and add one anecdote or memory about them. Encourage poetry and artwork as well.

After this task is completed, encourage students to share what stood out for them about these objects.

- Generate conversation around eye glasses and bracelet. Ask:
-

- Who do you think wore these? Why?
    - What do they say about the people who wore them? What clues do they give about their owners?
    - From what era might these items have come? What clues do they give about that era?
    - Could they be yours, a family member's, or a friend's today? If not, why not?
  
- Now show the photograph (below, p. 6) of the pile of eye glasses and explain that this picture is from an archive in Auschwitz. Explain the history of the photo's contents. ***For homework or extra credit, assign the essay "Sites, Sights, and Insights: Using Artifacts in Museum Education" in the Spring 2014 issue of PRISM: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Holocaust Educators, pp. 8–13. Compare the photo here on p. 6 to those in Figures 4 & 5 on p. 10 in the journal.***
- Distribute and read aloud Oriana Ivy's poem "Eyeglasses" (below, pp. 4-5).
- Ask students to reflect on the photo and the poem in a brief journal entry.
- Elicit students' thoughts and feelings after seeing the photo and reading/hearing the poem and knowing that these glasses were worn by Jews and taken from them during the Holocaust.
  
- Next, show students this article about the jewelry:
 

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/06/16/holocaust-survivor-donate\\_n\\_216064.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/06/16/holocaust-survivor-donate_n_216064.html)
- Ask students to reflect and share as a small group and then a whole group class discussion on this man's motivation. Was or is he a thief, survivor, liar, secret keeper, loyalist...?
- Ask the students to "walk to talk" with one person across the room and reflect on how their feelings about the artifacts have changed in light of the photo, the poem, and the story they have seen/read/heard. What is the difference between having a necessity and a luxury taken from you? Understand that the Jews were stripped of *all* their possessions, as well as of their homes, friends, and families.

### **Conclusion and Summative Assessment:**

- “Note-out-the-door” or “exit card”: Respond to 2 or more of these questions.
  - What makes artifacts powerful learning tools?
  - Why should we seek out and examine Holocaust artifacts?
  - How do these artifacts help facts become stories?
  - What will you tell your parents about what you learned from today’s activity?
  - Add your comments, questions, or feelings.

“Auschwitz attracted large flocks of crows,” writes Oriana Ivy, “so that is what gave me the idea for the phrase ‘crow sky.’ It is metaphorical as well: black, sinister, deathly.” Yet, despite the setting, “a man and a woman / help each other up.”

Oriana Ivy

Eyeglasses

Before my grandparents left Auschwitz,  
they went to the mountain of eyeglasses,  
thinking that by a miracle  
they might find their own.

But it was hopeless to sift  
through thousands of tangled pairs.

They tried one pair after another.

They had nothing to read, so they traced  
the wrinkles on their hands.

They’d bring the hand up close,  
follow the orbits of knuckles,

the map of fate in the palm.

If one eye saw right,  
the other was blurred;  
haze stammered the line of life.

They took several pairs.

My mother is embarrassed  
telling me the story,

embarrassed her parents  
took anything at all  
from the piles of looted belongings.

But I would have been like them.  
Those stripped to nothing end up  
with too much, except nothing fits

after reading your hands  
through the glasses of the dead —  
your hands no longer yours,  
but the hands of those  
whose ashes glowed as they rose  
into the crow sky.

Here is how beauty looks  
through those eyeglasses:  
blurred, skeletal,  
a man and a woman  
help each other up,  
walk out through the gate, walk on.

From *PRISM*, Spring 2012, p. 110.

